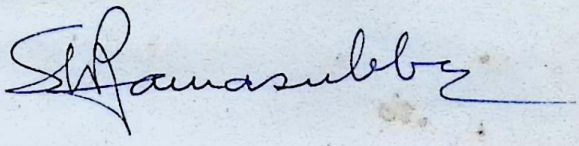

KRISHNAVATARA

VOLUME II

THE WRATH OF AN EMPEROR

By

K. M. MUNSHI

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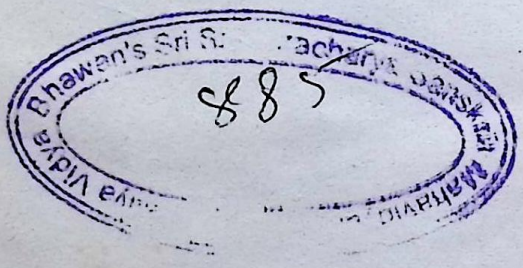

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INTRODUCTION

Who has not heard of Sri Krishna who delivered the message of the *Bhagavad Gita* and whom the *Bhagavata* calls "God Himself"?

From the earliest days that my memories can go back to, Sri Krishna has been, in a sense, dominating my imagination. In my childhood, I heard his adventures with breathless amazement. Since then I have read of him, sung of him, admired him, worshipped him in a hundred temples and every year on his birthday at home. And day after day, for years and years, his message has been the strength of my life.

Unfortunately, his fascinating personality, which could be glimpsed in what may be called the original *Mahabharata*, has been overlaid with legends, myths, miracles and adorations for about three thousand years.

Wise and valorous, he was, loving and loved, far-seeing and yet living for the moment, gifted with sage-like detachment and yet intensely human; the diplomat, the sage and the man of action with a personality as luminous as that of a divinity.

The urge, therefore, came upon me, time and again, to embark upon a reconstruction of his life and adventures by weaving a romance around him.

It was an impossible venture, but like hundreds of authors in all parts of India for centuries, I could not help offering him whatever little of imagination and creative power I possessed, feeble though they were.

I have called the whole work *Krishnavatara, The Descent of the Lord.* The First Part, which ends with the death of Kamsa, has been named "The Magic Flute", for it deals with his boyhood associated with the flute, which hypnotised men, animals and birds alike, sung with such loving tenderness by innumerable poets.

I have named this, the Second Part, which ends with Rukmini Haran, as "The Wrath of an Emperor", as the central theme is the successful defiance by Sri Krishna of Jarasandha, the Emperor of Magadha.

The Third Part, which is now being serially published in the "Bhavan's Journal", is entitled "The Five Brothers" which, I hope, will end with Draupadi's *swayamvara*.

In portraying Sri Krishna's life and adventures, I had, like many predecessors, to create episodes in order to bring out his character, attitudes and outlook in the perspective which has appeared natural to me. I have also had to give flesh and blood to the various shadowy characters referred to in the *Mahabharata*. I have, therefore, had to take unforgivable liberties with the accepted images which, I trust, the devout would forgive.

K. M. MUNSHI

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,
Chaupatty Road, Bombay 7.
November 15, 1963.

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KRISHNAVATARA

VOLUME II

THE WRATH OF AN EMPEROR

PROLOGUE

In the days of the ancient fathers of our race, the Aryas, a vigorous people, had spread over India, intermarrying with the Nagas, fighting with them or among themselves, and founding or destroying kingdoms.

The Arya *rishis*, dedicated to learning and self-discipline, lived in their hermitages, communing with gods and spreading the Arya way of life based on *Satya*, *Yajna* and *Tapas* — Truth, Sacrifice and Purity, which they called Dharma.

Long before kingdoms were established in the fertile plains of North India by adventurous Arya kings, the Yadavas had pushed their way across the river Ganga. Of them, the confederated tribes of the Shooras, the Andhakas and the Vrishnis were the most powerful.

These confederated tribes cleared the forests in the valley of the Yamuna and established settlements which collectively came to be called Shoorasena after the name of Shoora, the most powerful of their chiefs. Later they conquered Mathura, which in their hands grew in power, prosperity and influence.

The irrepressible Yadavas of Mathura had an inveterate horror of restraint. They would not have a king. Their affairs were carried on by a council of chiefs. However, Ugrasena, the chief of the Andhaka clan, came to be called 'king' by courtesy.

Andhaka Ugrasena's son, Kamsa, grew up, reckless, wild and ambitious. He distinguished himself by his valour and married Asti and Praapti, the daughters of Emperor Jarasandha of Magadha, who cherished the mighty ambition of subduing all the kings of the earth by guile and force. Kamsa became a trusted lieutenant of his father-in-law, captured power in Mathura and used it tyrannically.

Shoora, the powerful chief of the Shoora tribe, married Marishaa, the daughter of the Naga chief, Aryaka, and

begot sons, among whom were Vasudeva and Devabhbaga and daughters, among whom were Prithaa and Shrutashravaa.

Prithaa, the eldest, was given in adoption to King Kuntibhoja and came to be known as Kunti. Married to King Pandu of the Kurus of Hastinapura, she became the mother of the Five Brothers known as Pandavas, three of them, Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna, being born to her, and the other two, Nakula and Sahadeva, the sons of her co-wife, Madri, being adopted.

Shrutashravaa, the other daughter of Shoora, was married to King Damaghosha of Chedi and begot a son by name Shishupala, who, headstrong and ambitious, also wanted to win the favour of Jarasandha, the Emperor of Magadha.

Vasudeva, Shoora's eldest son, married Devaki, the daughter of Devaka, the brother of King Ugrasena.

To falsify the prophecy that the eighth son of his cousin Devaki would kill him, Kamsa put Vasudeva and Devaki in prison and killed their first six sons as they were born.

The seventh child, extracted from the womb long before his time, was secreted away and grew up as Samkarshana Balarama.

The eighth son, Krishna, who according to the prophecy was going to be the redeemer of the Yadavas, was taken away to Gokul at midnight no sooner he was born, and was brought up by Nanda, the chief, among the cowherds of Gokul.

Devabhaga, the younger brother of Vasudeva, begot Uddhava, who, when an infant, was sent to Gokul to be brought up as Krishna's companion.

Balarama, Krishna and Uddhava grew up, strong, handsome and venturesome. Krishna, the most loving and lovable of them, became the favourite of the cowherd community and the darling of the milkmaids of Vrindavan, where Nanda had migrated.

When Krishna was sixteen, he was brought to Mathura, where he killed his maternal uncle, the wicked Kamsa.

CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY :

SRI KRISHNA.

BALARAMA — his elder brother.

VASUDEVA — his father, Chief of the Shoora tribe of Yadavas.

DEVAKI — his mother.

KAMSA — his maternal uncle and Ugrasena's son, whom he killed.

GARGACHARYA — his family preceptor and High Priest of the Yadavas.

GURU SANDIPANI — his teacher, with his *ashram* at Ujjayini.

SHVETAKETU — his tutor, Sandipani's principal disciple.

TRIVAKRA — his devoted maid-servant.

UGRASENA — Head of the Andhaka clan and King of the Yadavas.

* * *

DEVABHAGA — Vasudeva's younger brother.

KAMSAA — his wife and the King's daughter.

CHITRAKETU — his eldest son.

BRIHADBALA — his second son.

UDDHAVA — his third son and Krishna's intimate friend.

AKRURA — the saintly chief of the Vrishni clan of Yadavas.

SHANKU, GADA — old Andhaka chiefs.

SATRAJIT — an elderly Yadava chief.

YUYUDHANA SATYAKI — a young Yadava chief.

JARASANDHA — Emperor of Magadha, Kamsa's Father-in-law.

HIS ALLIES : SHALVA, King of Saubha ; VINDA and ANUVINDA, twin princes of Avanti.

* * *

DAMAGHOSHA — King of Chedi.

SHRUTASHRAVA — his queen and sister of Vasudeva.

SHISHUPALA — their son.

* * *

BHISHMAKA — Bhoja king of Vidarbha.

KAISHIKA — his father.

RUKMI — his son.

RUKMINI — his daughter.

* * *

SHRIGALAVA VAASUDEVA — King of Karavirapura, who was killed by Sri Krishna in a fight.

PADMAVATI — his queen.

SHAKRADEVA — his minor son, and later king.

SHAIBYA — his niece.

* * *

1

A CROWN REJECTED

Krishna had perceived rightly. His swift action in killing Kamsa had a stunning effect. It halted both the confusion and the carnage.

The people were dazed for a moment; then, realising what had happened, their relief burst out spontaneously and they shouted for joy. The saviour had come; the tyrant was dead; the prophecy was fulfilled.

The Magadhans were equally stunned. The mighty Kamsa, whose orders they had been carrying out, was dead. The Yadavas outnumbered them. Pradyota, whom they had thought to be loyal to Kamsa, had killed their chief Vritrighna. The populace was exultant. Confounded and leaderless, they desisted from attack.

The young giant, who had killed Musthika and who was now leading the Yadavas, had ordered the Yadava chiefs to halt the attack. He was standing between the two fighting groups, mace in hand. His eyes, inflamed with anger, were eyeing every one menacingly. 'If anyone uses his weapon, I shall break his head,' he said in his trumpet-like voice.

Every one obeyed. Every weapon was lowered.

In the meantime, Vasudeva had taken counsel with Akrura and Pradyota. Then he went up to the royal guests. With their arms ready in their hands and their retainers surrounding them, they were watching the situation.

'Best among Kings, you need not be troubled. You are the honoured guests of the Yadavas. Please come with me to your quarters in the Palace. I shall be at your service.'

Akrura gave the necessary orders to the royal chamber-

lain to bring the dead body of Kamsa into the Palace, and left for the Princesses' quarters to meet his bereaved spouses.

Pradyota, who till lately was in charge of the Palace and the city, summoned his lieutenants and ordered them to maintain peace in the city.

Crowds had broken the enclosures and rushed to surround Krishna, with exultant cries of 'Jaya Krishna Vaasudeva.'[1] Some prostrated themselves before him. Some touched his feet. He was their saviour.

Krishna looked at them sorrowfully and raised his hand covered by Kamsa's blood. The crowd became silent. 'This is not the time for jubilation. Go home quietly. We are in mourning. Our Prince is dead,' he said.

Thus rebuked, the crowd fell apart and the people made for their homes. Krishna walked up to the place where Nanda, surrounded by his Gopas, was standing.

'Father, forgive me for doing what I did,' said Krishna as he fell at the feet of his foster-father. 'But there must be an end to wickedness some day. So the Gods have willed.'

'Krishna, my boy,' said Nanda, in a voice choked with emotion, 'may you live a hundred years, my Govinda!'

Uddhava, Krishna's friend, who had his clothes, gave him his *dhoti* to wear. He was in mourning on account of the death of his maternal uncle and could not wear other clothing.

'Father, you go to our camp; I will come to you after the funeral rites are over,' said Krishna.

Devaki came down from the terrace and stood on the veranda, her eyes fixed on the spot where her son was to be found at that time.

When Chanura had challenged Krishna, fear had frozen her heart. She had known sorrow for twenty-five years, from the day she had been married. Her life had been a nightmare. She had never for a moment ceased to shudder when she thought how her sons had been so brutally killed; and how her two living sons were growing up under a

strange roof, pursued by the wrath of her cousin. Only faith had borne her up: her eighth son would come to her some day.

She had waited for this day breathlessly. Never had she forgotten it, even for a moment. Her only solace so far had been her worship of the little golden image which she rocked in the toy cradle. It was to her the living presence of Krishna; speaking, smiling, playing pranks; enveloping her in his tiny arms; going away in childish anger to fling himself afterwards in her arms. All these years she had lived in a world in which there were only two people, her darling and herself. And like a fragile ethereal image of undying hope she had waited.

She had been told that he was not to come to her before the prophecy was fulfilled. It might endanger his life. And so, she had waited through endless, creeping moments.

Then Gargacharya, the venerable teacher of their family, had come and told her of the endless differences between the Yadava chiefs. Her mind was immediately made up. She had lived her life only for her darling; if he was killed, the prophecy would have failed; her faith would have vanished; she would have no reason to live. She had therefore decided, if her son was killed, to enter the fire. She had then gone to the Yadava chiefs and told them of her pledge.

Now he — her darling — was there. She had seen him coming through the gate; seen him following her seventh son, who was to the world the son of Rohini; seen him dressed in gay cloth, gold-embroidered, with a peacock's plume on his head-dress, handsome, graceful, with lotus eyes, with a smile which moved hearts to instant love.

Then Chanura had come and challenged him. She had overcome her fright. Where was her faith gone ? No ! No! He was her eighth son — a god, the saviour. Nothing could happen to him.

Then the miracles had happened one after the other. This boy had thrown the irresistible Chanura to the ground and killed him; pulled her wicked cousin by the hair, cut

off his head, fulfilled the prophecy. Her heart sang as it had never sung for twenty-five years. The palace seemed to her dancing with joy.

Then she heard shouts: 'Jaya Krishna Vaasudeva.' She saw him embracing her husband. Yes, the father and son were together — the first time since the father had left the new-born babe with Nanda.

Now he was talking to the crowds. The crowds had given way. Hurriedly, surrounded by her maids, she came down from the terrace and stood on the veranda, waiting for him to look towards her.

He was, however, coming towards her. On the way he had fallen at the feet of Nanda, his foster-father. He was coming to her — yes, to her. He was smiling at her, with the ineffable smile which she had seen so often in her dreams. He was coming; one step more and he would be in her arms. Her eyes were full of tears, like a sea, in which he seemed to be swimming towards her.

She opened her arms. He opened his.

'Mother!' He clasped her. She could not say a word. Her voice was choked. She fainted. He lifted her up.

The Yadava chiefs, some exultant, all feeling a sense of relief, gathered in the courtyard of Vasudeva's palace. Then Vasudeva came with Gargacharya.

Soon Acharya Sandipani joined them. He was now the preceptor of Vinda and Anuvinda, the two young princes of Avanti, who were among the royal guests of Kamsa. He had also spent a few months with Krishna and Balarama at Vrindavan as he had been directed by the venerable Veda Vyasa, the Best of Munis.

Then Pradyota came with two Yadava chiefs who had so far been busy establishing order in Mathura.

'Best of Shooras, we are in a very difficult position. Things have been moving so fast that, unless we move faster, our enemies will soon overwhelm Mathura,' said Pradyota addressing Vasudeva.

'I know,' replied Vasudeva. 'Some of our guests

were Kamsa's great friends. They are sure to turn against us.'

'That is not the only trouble. Jarasandha, the emperor of Magadha, will never forgive us for killing his son-in-law. Two of the queens — the noble Asti and Prapti — will range themselves against us. We have two thousand Magadhan warriors amidst us. We don't know what they will do.'

'We must act promptly. There should be no divided counsels amongst us,' said Vasudeva.

'King Ugrasena is weak. We must immediately select some one to be our master,' said Pradyota.

Some of the chiefs grew suspicious of the general. It looked to them as if he was aspiring to be the master.

'Why do we need to be in such haste?' protested some of the chiefs.

Vasudeva, after some thought, agreed with Pradyota. 'We must have some one to replace Kamsa — and immediately. That will be our challenge to our enemies.'

'What does the venerable Gargacharya feel?' asked Pradyota.

'I feel the same way as you do,' replied Gargacharya. 'There is sure to be a conspiracy to destroy Mathura. We have to gather strength immediately.'

'I am convinced that we should act promptly and vigorously. We should invite the Yadava chiefs, who have migrated or have been banished, to come home and enter into new alliances.'

'But who can be our chief?' asked a Yadava elder. 'Some one in whom all have full confidence.'

'Vasudeva, the Best of Shooras, should be our chief,' suggested one Yadava.

'My life has been one of sorrow. I have spent many anxious years. I will help whomsoever you choose. But I cannot be the chief,' said Vasudeva.

Many people began to eye Pradyota with suspicion. They did not want him, however competent he was.

Krishna came and took his seat by the side of his father. Every one, young and old, greeted him with folded hands. He was not a sixteen-year-old boy; he was their redeemer.

'Where have you been? I was waiting for you, Krishna,' said Vasudeva.

'After bringing mother here, I have been to see whether the remains of Uncle Kamsa have been attended to with proper rituals,' said Krishna.

'Our salutations to you, son of Vasudeva. You have worked a miracle.'

'I don't feel happy,' said Krishna, sadly shaking his head. 'I could not bear to hear the queens wailing. My uncle was a good and affectionate husband. Their hearts are broken,' said Krishna feelingly.

Some were surprised at this weak attitude on the part of their hero.

'Hereafter their life will be a wilderness,' he continued. Those who heard him were silent.

'But what could I do?' he continued. 'Wickedness must reap its reward. That is what the Gods have enjoined,' he added.

Before he could say anything more, Akrura came, leading the old and feeble Ugrasena. Balarama followed, supporting the aged Vajra Andhaka whose wounds, inflicted by Vritrighna under Kamsa's orders only three days before, were wrapped in bandages.

Every one stood up. The King took his seat near Vasudeva. Next to him sat Andhaka and Akrura. Balarama sat near Krishna.

Then, complications, internal and external, were discussed again and again.

Ghatikas[2] went by. Every aspect of the situation was examined.

Then old Ugrasena spoke to the Yadavas thus: 'I have heard everything. I agree with Pradyota that we must have someone to lead us in this crisis. I have also gathered

your views. I am old, physically broken. For years I have been in prison and lost touch with the world. I had one son; now I am sonless. I want Krishna to be my son and to succeed me as king.'

Every one applauded the idea. In fact the King only reflected the general wish.

During all this discussion between the elders, Krishna had sat quietly, modestly evading all eyes when his name was mentioned.

Every one responded by saying '*sadhu, sadhu*' (well said).

Krishna folded his hands and in tones of high respect said: 'Lord, you have conferred on me a high honour, the highest perhaps in the world; for Mathura is the crown jewel of the earth. But I am not fit for this responsibility. I know only the ways of a cowherd. I cannot be a king.'

'No, no, my son, you are the fittest choice.'

'Lord of the Yadavas, have mercy on me. I know what qualities a ruler should possess. I have not these qualities. Lord of men, you alone possess the qualities of a ruler which can keep the Yadavas together; you are loved by the people. And you should rule yourself. Venerable Father and Uncle Akrura, Pradyota shall carry the burden under your direction. And I shall be at my lord's side always. But first we have to be initiated into Kshatriya-hood, master the *Vedas* and learn the art of warfare.'

The two brothers and Uddhava lay down to sleep side by side.

Balarama began to laugh by himself in the darkness. It was all funny. On the day of the full moon, they were just cowherd boys. In three days, they were princes, and Krishna had rejected a throne. Perhaps it was foolish of him to have done so; perhaps he was, as usual, wiser not to have taken up such a responsibility.

The three days, thought Balarama, were days of triumph; that was due to his younger brother. He had fulfilled the prophecy. He was not convinced that Krishna was a god but, as a younger brother, he was so gentle, so

loyal and so clever. Balarama was carried away by a burst of affection. He rolled near Krishna and embraced him.

Krishna opened his eyes and responded.

'Krishna, Brother, you are wonderful,' said Balarama.

'Because I have a brother like you,' murmured Krishna.

And arm in arm, the brothers slept.

2

GURU SANDIPANI

Young Princess Rukmini sat in the corner of the room, being scowled at by Suvrata, the wife of Rukmi, Prince of Vidarbha.

'Where were you the whole of yesterday? I was anxious about you all day,' Suvrata shouted angrily.

'I was with Trivakra,' Rukmini said. 'Then I went to Princess Devaki's Palace. You were with Kamsa's queens.'

'I well know why you went there. When your brother comes I will see that he teaches you a lesson,' said Suvrata. 'I am ashamed of you. You are bringing shame to the august name of King Bhishmaka, Lord of Vidarbha.'

'As if you are doing anything else!' shouted Rukmini and sat in sullen anger, biting her lips and glaring at her brother's wife.

At dawn, Prince Rukmi, with other royal guests, joined Kamsa's funeral procession. The whole city had turned out to join the last journey of the ruler they had hated in life; courtesy to the royal house required it.

King Ugrasena had come. Old Vajra Andhaka, wounded and unable to walk as he was, had come too. So had Vasudeva and Akrura, with the two boys Balarama and Krishna.

King Ugrasena performed the obsequial ceremonies. After Kamsa had been cremated and his ashes consigned to the waters of the Yamuna, the mourners took their bathe in the river and returned to their homes.

It was past midday when Rukmi returned to the quarters in the royal palace placed at the disposal of the royal guests.

He was in a bad mood. Kamsa had been the leader

of the young group of rulers who, backed by the imperial power of Jarasandha, were extending their dominions. He and some of his friends had come to Mathura to celebrate Kamsa's triumph in the hope of consolidating their alliance.

But things had gone wrong from the time of his arrival. The two boys, who had now turned out to be Vasudeva's sons, had all but thrashed him. He hated the younger one for working miracles as he did.

Krishna had killed Kamsa, his friend and the most important member of the alliance of princes which Jarasandha had presided over. Now Mathura had become an uncertain factor; possibly Vasudeva or his son would become its ruler. Jarasandha would not forgive the Yadavas; their alliance was therefore useless to him. Things had all gone wrong.

He came back to his wife and sister in a frustrated and baffled mood.

'Noble lord, I am tired of your sister. Deal with her now as best as you can. I won't have anything to do with her any longer,' said Suvrata.

'And I am tired of you both,' Rukmini said from a corner, as sullen as ever.

'What is the matter?' asked Rukmi angrily. 'You two women can never live together without quarrelling, as if the troubles that have come to me were not enough. What is the matter, Rukmini?'

'Everything is the matter. Ask your wife. She hates me,' replied Rukmini.

'She hates both you and me,' Suvrata broke out. 'Yesterday, while the *bahu-yuddha* was going on, she was almost hanging from the parapet, jumping and shouting like the common people.'

'Why should I not jump? I was jumping on my legs, not yours,' said Rukmini in a temper.

'I know what you were doing. You were looking at that wicked young man, who, good lord, treated you so badly when we arrived,' said Suvrata.

'What did he do? He only brought my brother to me in his arms. Was he expected to throw him into the Yamuna?' asked Rukmini impertinently.

'And you were dancing with joy when the lord of Andhakas was killed,' added Suvrata.

'How cleverly he did it! One stroke — and whish — off went his head,' said Rukmini.

'Now you, women, will you stop chattering? Tell me what the matter is,' asked Rukmi.

'Then she disappeared —,' Suvrata began.

'I did not disappear. I went with Trivakra —,' said Rukmini.

'Yes, to see that murderer —,' said Suvrata.

'No, to see Princess Devaki. Everybody here calls her a saint —,' interrupted Rukmini.

'No, you went near that Krishna —,' said Suvrata.

'No. I was with Princess Devaki. He happened to be there —,' said Rukmini.

'And then you went to Prince Vasudeva's Palace —,' said Suvrata.

'Will you stop chattering, both of you?' shouted Rukmi.

'Brother, ask your wife to stop first. If she speaks, I will too,' said Rukmini petulantly.

'I am to blame always —,' Suvrata broke down. 'Brother and sister are in agreement and I am the only wicked one in the family.' She wiped her tears which were flowing copiously.

'As if brother and sister ought not to agree,' Rukmini muttered to herself.

'Now, will someone tell me what happened at Vasudeva's palace? I can't understand a word,' said Rukmi.

'Ask your beloved sister. I was not there,' Suvrata said in disgust.

'Of course I went there,' said Rukmini. 'Princess

Devaki had fainted, so her son carried her in his arms. Trivakra and I went with them.'

'She went without telling me,' Suvrata complained.

'Will you let me listen to Rukmini?' said Rukmi impatiently. 'I want to know what happened there.' He had sensed the importance of knowing what was happening in Vasudeva's Palace.

Suvrata looked up to heaven as if to call it to witness. 'Did I not tell you that brother and sister are in agreement? They are born of the same mother. I alone am the stranger.'

'Be silent,' shouted Rukmi. 'Yes?' he asked Rukmini.

'What else? I sat there with Trivakra. Princess Devaki soon revived, and mother and son clung to each other. The mother was crying. The son was saying the most loving things,' said Rukmini, beginning to be carried away by her feelings. 'Oh, Vaasudeva can say the most soothing words when he begins to talk in that way.'

'Then what did Krishna do?' demanded Rukmi. 'Who else came in there?'

'The Yadava chiefs gathered in the courtyard under the big tree. And Princess Devaki's son went away to meet the queens of Kamsa,' said Rukmini.

'You see, she cannot even utter his name! Can you sense the significance of that, Son of King Bhishmaka?' asked Suvrata.

'Oh, be quiet,' said Rukmi peremptorily. 'What did the chiefs do?'

'They selected Krishna as the ruler of Mathura,' said Rukmini.

'Oh, God of gods!' exclaimed Rukmi almost in distress.

'Don't be so unhappy, Brother,' said Rukmini sarcastically. 'He refused to be the Ruler.'

'Refused! Refused the throne of Mathura?'

'Yes, he did. He said he was a cowherd boy and not

fit to be a ruler. Are you happy now? Only I am angry. But who cares about my anger?' said Rukmini in indignation.

'Yes, she wanted to be his queen,' said Suvrata bitterly. 'All her hopes are dashed to the ground.'

A chamberlain entered the room, offered salutations and announced that Guru Sandipani and the twin Princes, Vinda and Anuvinda, sons of King Jayasena of Avanti, wanted to meet the Prince and were waiting outside.

The women rose hurriedly, tidied themselves and, as the three visitors entered the room, went and touched the feet of the teacher Sandipani. So did Rukmi. They also accosted the two young Princes from Avanti, with appropriate salutations.

Guru Sandipani was tall and straight, and had tense well-knit muscles. His black beard and matted locks framed a hatchet face with sharp features, brilliant eyes, an arched nose and a mouth which invariably wore a benign look.

Twenty-five years ago, he had left the *ashram* of the mighty sage Parashurama, Bhargava, and travelled from place to place, passing on to others his special knowledge of the use of arms. Fifteen years ago now he had established an *ashram* at Avanti, which had become one of the most famous schools for training in arms, and kings from that part of the country sent their sons and the sons of their chiefs to be trained under him. And there was nothing in military strategy, it was said, that they could not learn from Sandipani. Rukmi had been trained in his *ashram,* and Vinda and Anuvinda were still studying under the Guru.

He had been travelling for some time with about forty pupils, visiting royal courts where he was very welcome. He and his pupils had now come to Mathura, from where he would return to his *ashram.*

Rukmi asked the Master what his orders were.

'Rukmi, I have been sent by King Ugrasena to invite you to stay here for a fortnight,' said Sandipani.

'For a fortnight? No, Prince Kamsa was my friend and I should not like to stay here any longer,' said Rukmi.

'I understand what you must be feeling. But King Ugrasena is very insistent. Nobody can undo what *Vidhi* (the Creator) has willed,' said Sandipani.

'Do stay, Prince,' urged young Vinda. 'We shall be happy all returning together with the Master.'

'I should like to go. What should I be doing here for fifteen days?' asked Rukmi, finding it difficult not to accede to Sandipani's request.

'Having come here, it would not be courteous to leave before the twelve days of mourning are over. And then on the fifth day of Kartik, they are celebrating the *yajnopavita samskara* of Balarama and Krishna,' said Sandipani.

'The sacred thread ceremony of those young men? Has it not been performed so far?' asked Rukmi in surprise.

'You know they have been brought up as cowherds so far. But now they have to be duly initiated into the *samskara,*' said Sandipani.

'Is it true, Gurudeva, that Krishna refused to accept the rulership of Mathura?' asked Rukmi.

'You seem to be well-informed. Well, yes, if you ask me, though we wanted to keep it a secret,' said Sandipani.

'Why did he refuse? I thought he was eager for it, having killed his maternal uncle with his own hands,' Rukmi sneered.

'Prince of Vidarbha, how few know this boy? He is interested in uprooting *adharma,* not in ruling,' said Sandipani.

'How do you know? It may be that he has too many enemies among the Yadavas,' suggested Rukmi.

'He has none. They all wanted him to be ruler,' said Sandipani.

'Then what will he do now?' asked Rukmi.

'Oh, he is coming with us to the Guru's *ashram* for

training,' answered Anuvinda, one of the twin Princes of Avanti.

'Oh!' exclaimed Rukmi.

'Why, you don't want him to?' asked Sandipani. 'I have lived with him at Vrindavan for some months. I would never miss training a pupil like him,' said the Master.

'So, you want us all to go with you. What do you think?' Rukmi turned to his wife. He suspected some clever move behind this invitation and wanted to know about it. He also wanted time to think.

'I want you to stay, Brother. We must bow to the wishes of the Gurudeva,' said Rukmini, her eyes shining. Suvrata looked at her with annoyance and then replied to her husband's question: 'I would like to go. Perhaps Gurudeva can follow with the Princes of Avanti.'

'Now see, my Prince, the two ladies have exactly opposite opinions,' said Sandipani with a smile. 'That leaves you to decide for yourself, for you are sure to have one of them in your favour, whatever you decide. Perhaps it will be worth your while to stay here. Complications might arise and your father, Bhishmaka, the Best of Bhojas, would like you to know all about them.'

'If you say so, we will stay, though I don't feel quite happy about it,' said Rukmi.

3

IN THE VORTEX

Krishna stood near the funeral pyre of his maternal uncle Kamsa, in deep thought.

How foolish of Kamsa to think that no one was like him ; that he, of all men, was born to rule, and to shape, destroy and re-make things and men as he liked ! Krishna felt he could see the difference between such men and men like Akrura who lived humbly and in the service of the gods.

Krishna saw King Ugrasena lighting the funeral pyre of his only son, with tears in his eyes. He could tell that inexpressible sadness was in his heart, not for losing a son, but that his son should have led such a ruinous life and destroyed so many innocent lives.

Krishna was convinced that he had fulfilled the prophecy of the divine Sage. Wickedness had to be destroyed; innocence and godliness had to be protected — that was Dharma. He had only vindicated Dharma. The gods wished it to be done. That was all.

All the people returned from the cremation ground, looking serious, but relieved at heart. Men have to die; they only live on in the affectionate memory of the survivors; otherwise their lives are wasted.

Krishna was impatient to see Father Nanda. He had noticed him on the cremation ground, at a distance. Krishna also understood how Nanda, with his sturdy common-sense, had realised three days ago what his foster-child was — and would continue to be — Prince Vasudeva's son and the leader of Mathura. Krishna felt unhappy that Nanda was forced to see this, but he also understood that it was very sensible of Father Nanda to behave so correctly.

He took his purificatory bathe and, accompanied by his

Big Brother and Uddhava, proceeded to the gardens of the temple on the outskirts of the town where Father Nanda and his Gopas had camped.

Balarama, Uddhava and Krishna rushed to the spot where Father Nanda was sitting, and prostrated themselves before him. He took all three of them into his arms, but he released Krishna last of all, for he wanted to hold him in his arms for as long a time as possible and tickle his neck with his nose as he had been used to doing from the days of his childhood.

His eyes were moist. He struggled to control his voice. 'Krishna, we are going tomorrow,' he said.

'Tomorrow, Father?' asked Balarama in surprise. 'But we are going to be invested with the sacred thread a fortnight hence. You must stay for the occasion. Krishna, why don't you press Father to stay?'

Father shook his head. 'Rama, we can't stay any longer. The time, my boys, to part from you has come. And the earlier we part, the better for all of us.'

'Father, but why are you in such a hurry?' Krishna asked.

'Krishna, my darling, from the day you were entrusted to my care, I knew you would have to leave me some time. And there could be no more glorious time to part than now. You have won the love of all. You have fulfilled the prophecy of the Divine Sage. I am happy—' Father Nanda paused, wiped a tear and continued: 'I also am unhappy. Both of you were dear to me. I could not have loved you more if you had been my own sons. Having you with me I never felt that I was sonless. So there is a void here,' he said, pointing to his wide chest. 'I must submit to the will of the gods. You have a great future before you, my boys. But if I continue here, my distress will be unbearable. What has to be done had best be done quickly. Your mother is waiting to hear the news from Mathura. Her heart will be desolate at losing you. I must be by her side to give her strength.'

Balarama was not happy, but Krishna could see that

their Father was right. There was no use in prolonging this agony of parting.

'Father, Father, whatever happens, wherever I am, you have only to remember me and I shall be at your side.'

'My son, you will always be at my side. My life has not been in vain now that I have seen you become so wonderful. We will go tomorrow morning.'

'We will come and see you off. And Father, I would like to send Uddhava with you to convey my messages to friends and a few presents.'

'Certainly.'

And as Krishna left the brave old man who loved him so well, he felt a pang shooting through his heart and a tear moistening his eye.

Then he remembered his friends, boys and girls, with whose life his had been so intimately woven from his birth. Yes, a message was due to them.

There was also Radha — his goddess of joy. He took Uddhava, his beloved friend, aside and asked him to convey messages to all his friends.

He went to his Father Vasudeva's palace and met his Mother. It was surprising to see how she had loved him throughout these sixteen years, though he had been to her nothing but a name. And now her eyes, when they saw him, were lit with a sudden joy.

His Father was different. He did not show his feelings so much, but he was vastly understanding. He was glad that Krishna had declined to be the ruler of Mathura. He did not like the idea at all and had been afraid that Krishna might, in boyish enthusiasm, accept the offer. But he told his son of many things when Balarama, Uddhava and Krishna sat with him. He spoke to Krishna of his great ancestors; of *Kshatra dharma* — the true warrior's duties — for which they had lived and died. He also talked of the great Sages whose only possession was *Brahma tej* — the power which comes of learning and non-possession —

and how they are the unfailing guides of men and loved by the gods.

He also spoke of sister Kunti, who would have been an empress of the Kurus as Hastinapura, if her husband Pandu had been alive; and of her five sons who, he said, were very clever, but very badly treated by the sons of their blind uncle, Dhritarashtra.

Krishna also learned how his Father and Uncle Akrura, Guru Gargacharya and Sandipani, had prevailed upon the royal guests not to depart but stay till he was invested with the sacred thread. It was strange, he thought, how the Vidarbha Prince and his sister behaved. The Prince was not willing to stay longer, naturally, for he had been Uncle Kamsa's friend and both Balarama and Krishna had treated him unpleasantly on his arrival. But it had not been Krishna's fault; he had to be taught the manners of an Arya.

But his sister, Rukmini, as Krishna could see, was behaving very very strangely. She made it a point to stay with his Mother all the time, of course in company with Trivakra. That was not all. The way she looked at him really passed all bounds. Wherever he moved, her large, beautiful eyes were upon Krishna. It was really amusing. If she could have eaten him up with her eyes, she would have done so.

It was settled that Balarama, Uddhava and he were to go with Guru Sandipani to his *ashram* to spend the days of their studentship. He had liked the Guru immensely when he came to Vrindavan and lived with him and taught him a few tricks in archery and how to wrestle with and lasso bulls when they ran wild. His Father had told him that in the Guru's *ashram* he would have to work hard, for he had to make up for lost time.

His Father often thought he was a small child and believed that he needed to be told certain things which he knew very well. Possibly he thought that it was his duty to do so. Perhaps it sprang from a father's love which could never recognise that he had grown up. Perhaps it

was just as well, for he needed someone to whom he could be just a child to be petted.

His Uncle Kamsa's funeral obsequies were over. On the twelfth day after his death, King Ugrasena had performed the final rituals. The rice balls, sanctified by *mantras,* had been offered to his ancestors, and Kamsa's spirit had left for the land of the dead, the land of the manes.

In these days Krishna learned many things, of which he had known nothing before. By killing the tyrant Kamsa, he had attained to the position of saviour and leader of the Yadavas of Mathura. But he had, however, no idea that by that very act he would be catapulted into a vast and unfamiliar world of terrific ambitions and intrigues.

With the instinct which never failed him, he declined to be the ruler of Mathura. He had now made up his mind to make up for his lack of education by studying under Guru Sandipani. But all the same he was drawn into the vortex of royal intrigues; there was no escape for him, for the plight in which his people, the Yadavas, had been plunged by his action, was a serious one.

King Ugrasena was feeble; he was good but in a negative sort of way. Father Vasudeva as the head of the Shooras and Uncle Akrura as the head of the Vrishnis, were the only people who stood for stabilising forces in the new Mathura. One was sober-minded and the other saintly, but both were incapable of quick decision or prompt initiative. Pradyota was effective in his way, but only as second-in-command. Vajra Andhaka, though he commanded universal respect, was too old to take the lead in the difficult days which appeared to be coming. The other Yadava chiefs had spent their lives resisting Kamsa and lacked the ability and training to consolidate their power.

The Yadava chiefs who had been driven out by Kamsa were now returning to Mathura with their families and retainers. Their leaders including Vikadru and Gada had all the weaknesses of men who considered themselves deeply wronged. They were only interested in laying claim to the

palaces and lands filched from them. They grumbled, complained, quarrelled. They ceaselessly manoeuvred for positions and were unwilling to recognise any duties. They scarcely lent strength to Mathura.

Then it was that Krishna discovered what a formidable place his Uncle Kamsa had occupied among the powerful kings of the day.

The Yadavas, or Bhojas as his people were sometimes called, a loosely-woven confederacy of tribes, were a mighty people. They were irrepressible, fighting, killing and being killed all the time. They pushed their way into unknown lands and made them their own.

They were always proud of their descent from the great emperor Yayati and his son Yadu. In actual practice, however, they were never troubled about purity of race. When they wanted wives, they took them from the Aryan and non-Aryan tribes alike, with or without the consent of their parents. They reared large families; their wives, daughters and sisters were their pawns in the great game for power and possession.

In those days Krishna learned many things about the early history of his ancestors. Haryashva, one of the early kings of his people, for instance, had married the daughter of the demon Madhu, gained Anarta and Surashtra by way of inheritance and founded the mountain fortress of Girinagar. Yadu himself had married Naga princesses, by whom he had five brave sons, all of whom had founded kingdoms. One of them was Madhava, from whom all the clans — the Andhakas, the Vrishnis, the Shooras and others — claimed descent.

But he learned that his people had one constant characteristic. Though their lives might be stormy, they never failed to uphold Arya Dharma wherever they might be. Whatever they were engaged on, they displayed an irrepressible zeal to persuade everyone to accept Dharma. Evidently this zeal gave them a sense of mission and a feeling of invincibility. And they were never slow to lavish gifts on learned Brahman sages or to build hermitages for

them or hold sacrificial sessions lasting for years. Kamsa was perhaps the only exception.

Though his branch, descended from King Madhava, had established itself at Mathura, of recent years the branch of the Bhojas, settled in Chedi, had had a more powerful kingdom. He therefore looked forward to meeting their king, Damaghosha, who was married to his Father's sister Shrutashrava. Both of them, with their son Shishupala, would be coming, as they had been specially invited to his *upanayana* ceremony.

But one formidable name was always spoken when the chiefs held their secret deliberations — Jarasandha. He was the King of Magadha and the father of Asti and Prapti, two of the widows of Kamsa. He was the Overlord — *chakravarti* — having established suzerainty over many of the surrounding kingdoms.

Trusted messengers had been sent to him to inform him of the sad fate that had overtaken his son-in-law. Kamsa had been not only his son-in-law, but his most trusted vassal. And the future of Mathura was uncertain, for no one believed that the news of his death would be taken quietly by the mighty King.

Krishna came to realise that in ridding Mathura of the tyrant, he, a cowherd boy, had dealt a crushing blow to the prestige of the most powerful monarch of the day. He was not daunted; as Jarasandha was *adharma* incarnate, it was just that he should be fought as well. That was what Krishna thought, but he did not say so, because, if he had, the chiefs would have considered him irresponsible.

The hopes of the Yadavas of Mathura were, however, centred on King Damaghosha. Though he was married to Krishna's father's sister, he was a staunch ally of Jarasandha. His son Shishupala, Krishna learned, was a favourite at the imperial court. So they could, if they exerted themselves, allay the wrath of the emperor.

Krishna was told by his Father that Rukmi's father Bhishmaka, the King of Vidarbha, was also a trusted ally of Jarasandha, though he was a Bhoja. He was therefore

not likely to be ready to forfeit the imperial goodwill by helping Mathura. Rukmi, the Prince, was a headstrong young man; Krishna knew him very well. Now he was told that Rukmi dominated his father. He was a staunch friend and a great admirer of Uncle Kamsa. Though he had agreed to stay for the ceremony because of Guru Sandipani's pressure, not all the cordiality of Krishna's Father or Uncle had weaned him away from his hostility to every one of them.

Soon, however, there was a serious upset in everyone's calculations. Queen Shrutashrava of Chedi, Vasudeva's sister, arrived. She brought a large retinue and her air was patronising but, contrary to what was expected, she was not accompanied by her husband, King Damaghosha, who had begged to be excused, and who evidently had no intention of siding with Krishna openly, because he had killed Jarasandha's favourite. His son, Shishupala, Krishna was told, contemptuously turned down the suggestion to attend the ceremony. He would have nothing to do — he was reported as having said — with a 'cowherd boy'! Yes, Krishna was a cowherd boy; and was not sorry to be one. For those who thought that a cowherd boy was to be held in contempt were quite wrong.

4

THE FIVE BROTHERS

Three days had passed. There was excitement in Mathura. Runners had come to announce that Kunti, his Father's sister and the widow of King Pandu of Hastinapura, was arriving to attend Krishna's *upanayana* ceremony. Her sons and her minister Vidura were also coming with her.

Hastinapura, Krishna knew very well, was the most powerful kingdom after Jarasandha's. The Kurus ruled there; they were the major branch of the Bharatas to which even Krishna belonged.

Dhritarashtra, their king, was blind and weak. The kingdom of the Kurus, however, was dominated by a mighty warrior, Bhishma. He was, Krishna was informed, the pupil of no less a warrior than Parashurama. He was usually called the Grandfather.

The warriors of Hastinapura were trained and led by Dronacharya who himself was a great warrior and also a former pupil of that great hero Parashurama. Their minister, Vidura, who was coming with Kunti, was famed for his wisdom. Their policies were, Krishna was told, often guided by no less a person than the venerable Veda Vyasa, the Master of all learning, revered throughout the Aryan world.

On her arrival, Krishna found that Kunti treated him in a very maternal way. Though she had never seen him before, she immediately recognised him, embraced him and breathed in the scent of his hair.

'You have been a very wicked young man, Krishna,' Kunti said in her inimitably sweet voice, tilting his chin, with a laugh. 'I have heard so much about you.'

Then she fell at Vasudeva's feet and hugged Devaki with effusive cordiality. These two, as they stood together, each one laying her head on the other's shoulders for some time, smiling and crying alternately, made a fine pair. Both had been through hard times and that gave them a common bond of suffering.

Kunti's five sons were very attractive. They were handsome and well-built. Each one was faultless in his behaviour. The eldest, Yudhishthira, bore himself with serene dignity at a tender age, being barely three years older than Krishna. The second son, Bhima, though a head shorter than Balarama, was all muscles. His face was jovial and his eyes twinkled with fun. When Krishna fell at his feet, as a younger brother should, he responded not in the usual way by placing his hand on Krishna's head; he gave him a resounding smack. It smarted for a time, but it showed his open-hearted affection for Krishna.

Kunti's third son, Arjuna, carried a bow and arrows. He was about Krishna's own size — perhaps a little thinner. He was well-shaped and had very intelligent eyes. He was remarkably well-mannered. When he fell at Krishna's feet — for he was younger than Krishna — he did it with perfect grace. Krishna immediately felt attracted to him, and embraced him with warmth.

The two younger boys, Nakula and Sahadeva, who were twins, were smaller in size, slender and shapely, but very intelligent. They knew that they were the juniors of the family and treated Krishna with great respect.

When the elders left, the five brothers — they were all called Pandavas after their father — surrounded Balarama and Krishna and immediately Bhima, with a genial laugh, put a blunt question to Krishna.

'Now, Krishna, tell us the truth,' he said. 'Are all the stories about you true or have you invented them?' In another man's mouth, this question would have been offensive, but the wholehearted laugh and the affectionate glance which accompanied it belied the tenor of his words.

'I do not know what stories you have heard amout me,'

Krishna said with an equally affectionate smile. It depends upon whether the people of Hastinapura can invent good stories or not.' He — this Bhima — was an immensely likable fellow.

'Now don't be clever, Brother,' said Bhima, patting him on the back. 'Is it true that you killed Putana and Bakasura, Keshi and Arishta? Did you capture the fiery Kaliya? Did you lift Mount Govardhan? Tell me the truth,' Bhima went on asking, fastening his two hands on his shoulders.

'And made love to milkmaids too?' Arjuna added with a smile. His smile was very pleasant.

Krishna had never expected such an effusion of affection from his cousins. He put his arm round Bhima and asked him: 'What do you think I did, Bhima? Did I invent those deeds?' Krishna's eyes were laughing too.

Balarama blurted out: 'And did we also invent the story of killing Kamsa, Chanura and Musthika? Why don't you ask the people of Mathura what we did?'

Yudhishthira, the eldest of the five brothers, intervened for the first time. He had a quiet, dignified way of talking. 'Brother, please forgive Bhima for being so impatient. But your chief, Shanku, who came to Hastinapura to invite us, told us so many things about both of you that we found it difficult to distinguish between what you had done and not done. We want to know all that happened.' Then he turned to Krishna and said in a gentle voice: 'Don't misunderstand Bhima. He has his own special way of talking. All these days he has been speaking with great pride about the wonderful things which you have done. He is full of them.'

'No, you are quite wrong, Brother,' said Bhima with his loud, good-natured laugh. 'If you, Krishna, have done all these things, I am extremely jealous of you. I wish I could kill some of my cousins, say Duryodhana and Duhshasana, and wring the neck of that charioteer's son Karna, in the same way that you killed your maternal uncle.'

Yudhishthira, with a smile, raised a warning hand. 'Bhima, let us not tell Krishna and Balarama our family secrets all at once.'

'Anyway I would like to hear all about your wicked cousins,' said Balarama for once getting into the spirit of this light-hearted talk. 'When you decide to finish them off, call me and we shall do the job together.'

It was no use talking about their unhappy lot in Hastinapura. Krishna, therefore, changed the conversation. 'Forget all about us,' he said. 'Tell us about all you have learnt — *Vedas* and *Shastras* — and about the wonderful weapons which your Guru must have taught you to use. You have such excellent training, while we are two ignorant cowherd boys. We are going to go to school now, whilst you have practically finished your school-days.'

'But you have achieved something which we will perhaps never be able to do in the whole of our life,' interposed Arjuna with his pleasing smile. 'You have rescued Mathura from a tyrant.' His voice was full of admiration and he looked at Krishna in a very loving manner.

'—— and saved Dharma also,' said Yudhishthira.

'—— and made powerful enemies all round,' Krishna said. Everyone laughed outright at what he said. They did not realise that it was all too true.

'We shall come to your rescue whenever you want us to,' assured Bhima.

'Don't be so sure,' said Arjuna. 'Perhaps Krishna and Balarama will have to come to our rescue.'

Krishna saw the unhappiness in Arjuna's eyes and in a serious voice he asked : 'Are things so bad as all that ?'

'It would be hard for you to understand how unhappy we are,' replied Arjuna in a sad voice which appeared to suppress indignation. 'People think that we are the cadets of the House of Kuru. In fact, we are its helpless dependants.'

'Now let us not make ourselves unhappy by thinking

of miseries to come. Let us enjoy ourselves while we are together today,' broke in Balarama. He did not like being reminded of sad things. 'Bhima, I am told you are an expert wrestler. Come along with me, we will teach each other a few tricks.'

'And, brothers, I would like to take you for a swim in the Yamuna,' Krishna said to the rest.

'No. I want to go and tell my Uncle all the news from Hastinapura. Mother wants Uncle Akrura to come with us when we return to Hastinapura,' said Yudhishthira as he left with Sahadeva.

'I also would like to go to Mother. I shall not be happy till she is comfortably settled,' said Nakula and followed Yudhishthira.

So Krishna and Arjuna were left alone. 'Let us go and swim. But tell me the latest you have learnt, say in archery. I am told that you are a master of the art,' Krishna said, and placed a hand affectionately on Arjuna's shoulder, leading him towards the river.

'The latest I learnt was to shoot at a target in the dark. That annoyed Gurudeva Dronacharya very much,' said Arjuna a little modestly.

'What happened?' Krishna asked.

'One day, while I was sitting at my meal, there was a strong wind and the light was blown out. While I continued to eat, the thought came to me that if my hand could carry food to my mouth in darkness, why could I not send my arrow too to its target in darkness. Then I underwent training, night after night, shooting at a target in the dark. It required long and continuous practice. But then ultimately I could do it,' said Arjuna, looking at Krishna to find out whether his narration was taken by him as a boast.

'Your Guru must have been happy about it,' Krishna said.

'I think he was. But as things are at Hastinapura, he could not show that he was happy. If we ever outstripped our cousins, he would immediately be blamed for not teaching them well,' confessed Arjuna.

'But I hope all of you excel them,' Krishna said.

'Perhaps we do,' said Arjuna laughing. He had a very friendly, shy way of laughing. 'That is our trouble. Our cousins and even our Uncle, the emperor, would have been very happy indeed if we had turned out to be stupid.'

And then they plunged into the river, swam, performed tricks and were as happy as water-birds. As they were enjoying their bathe, Yudhishthira, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva came for theirs too. Bhima left his brothers to bathe in shallow waters, plunged into the river, swam to where Krishna and Arjuna were, tried to play a joke upon them by pressing their heads under water and dashed out before they could catch him, laughing all the time. Then the four of them left for the palace.

Arjuna and Krishna came out arm in arm and flung themselves on the river bank and closed their eyes.

After some time, Krishna opened his eyes. 'Arjuna, is it true that you were born of God Indra?' he asked, for he was reminded of a promise which he had made to a god.

'The venerable Vyasa told me about it. And so did Mother,' said Arjuna.

'That explains it,' Krishna said.

'What explains what?' asked Arjuna.

Now that he had asked the question, Krishna wanted to disclose to him what none but he knew.

'You know, in Vrindavan I induced the people not to celebrate the festival sacred to God Indra. People were doing it out of fear of the god. I told them not to worship the god out of fear. So we began to celebrate the festival in which we worshipped Govardhan, the trees and the cows. Then God Indra was angry. He poured thunder and rain and lightning on us. All our people would have been washed away but for Giriraj, the Lord of Mountains, who rose several cubits higher to make place for us. Thus we vanquished God Indra,' Krishna said.

'What happened afterwards?' asked Arjuna.

'When Indra was humbled, we performed a sacrifice

in his honour. Then one day as I was grazing the cows, he came to me in a daydream. "Krishna, you were right. I want the worship of love, not of fear." I did him honour by prostrating myself before him. Then I said to him: "Yes, I want you to love us, not frighten us." He said: "I only frighten cowards. The brave I love and honour." Then he said to me: "Will you do me a favour?" I said: "Certainly." The god said: "I have a son. Stand by him. Promise me." I said: "Yes, I promise." Then he disappeared without telling me who his son was and where he was to be found. I have been all along wondering where I would find Indra's son. Then, Mother, the other day, told me that you are Indra's son. Now I have found you,' Krishna told Arjuna and he led him by the hand.

'I wish we could always be together,' Arjuna said sincerely.

'We shall,' Krishna said, for he felt sure of it. Now he had not one brother but six. The vista rose before Krishna of all seven of them working miracles to re-establish Dharma and reform the sordid world which surrounded them.

But he felt convinced that that would depend on his being able not to dissipate his energy like other Princes but standing for Dharma above everything else and gathering round him all those who were prepared to do so too.

But above all, he had to perform the task which stood before him — become a *perfect brahmachari,* so long as he was one. Then time would show him the next step.

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5

AS A *BRAHMACHARI*

Arjuna and Krishna lay side by side, talking far into the night. Arjuna spoke of all that was happening to them at Hastinapura; of their triumphs and trials, of the humiliation to which they were subjected, of the affection in which they were held by their Grandfather Bhishma and the venerable Veda Vyasa. He also told Krishna how, years before, he and his brothers had been invested with the sacred thread; how they had led the hard life of a *brahmachari* — celibate student; and how their teachers were more than satisfied with their self-imposed discipline.

'But I was a small boy then. You are now past sixteen, Krishna,' remarked Arjuna. 'You will find it hard to undergo the rigour of that hard life.'

'Not a bit,' Krishna answered. 'I must undergo the rigid discipline of a *brahmachari.* I can't be true to Dharma if I don't prepare myself for standing for it.'

'But you have led a free and easy life in Vrindavan,' Arjuna raised a doubt. He was a great fellow for raising doubts and asking questions.

'That is all the more reason that I should make up for lost time,' Krishna said. 'And I am determined to do it — do it thoroughly. I cannot enjoy life unless I know how to enjoy it and where to stop, so that the enjoyment never ends in gluttony.'

'We have no enjoyment worth the name. And if Duryodhana succeeds in depriving us of our patrimony, I don't know where we will have to migrate to in search of a place to live in,' said Arjuna sadly.

'Why should you be denied your rightful patrimony? There are five of you brothers. Have you no faith in

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yourselves ?' Krishna asked. He found it difficult to understand how such clever young men could lack faith. He himself never lacked it.

'Well, I have got some faith after meeting you. You know, I have never felt so strong as when we swam together,' said Arjuna.

'And we shall swim together — all our lives — till we have fulfilled our Dharma,' Krishna assured him.

'Why do you always talk about Dharma as if you know all about it, Krishna ?' Arjuna asked timidly.

Krishna laughed. 'It is very simple. I can see where my Dharma lies — at every moment,' he said.

'That is more than I can do,' said Arjuna modestly.

Arjuna was very modest, never bragged, and believed in Krishna; that was why Krishna liked him so much.

The day after, the ceremony of investing Krishna with the sacred thread began. All celebrations had been stopped, for they were still in mourning for the death of Krishna's Uncle.

Two days later, the ceremony reached its final stage. The heads of all three of them were shaved except for the sacred tuft; the sacred fires were lit; Krishna asked permission of his Father and Mother, and uncles and aunts and of Gurudeva Gargacharya, and wore the sacred thread to the chant of *mantras.*

Each of them was given a deer skin to wear over his shoulder-straps by day and to lie on at night; also a staff, a *kamandalu* (bowl hewn out of wood) and a pair of sandals.

Now Krishna was 'reborn,' as the *shastras* say : that is, he was a full Arya charged with sacred duties; he had entered the stage of *brahmacharya* (celibate studenthood), during which he was expected to observe strict discipline.

As a *brahmachari,* he had to beg for his food. So he stood before Mother with his bowl in his hand and uttered the formula, '*Bhavati, bhiksham dehi*' (Lady, give me food by way of alms).

He was happy that he was a student now. He was going to live with Guru Sandipani, to serve him and to carry out his wishes. He was going now to forego all pleasures and be worthy to fulfil his Dharma.

It was a very enjoyable life, though it was different from the gay and easy life that he had led at Vrindavan. But this studenthood was Dharma; he had now to prepare for developing *Brahma tej* or *Kshatra tej.* Perhaps he might develop both; why not?

He left his Father's palace and went to live with Guru Sandipani, who had a sweet smile and very expressive eyes. He could command by a look.

He had now entered studenthood — the stage of *brahmacharya,* as he realised now that he was lying on the ground in a garden where Sandipani and his pupils had taken up their quarters. He now had to be a perfect *brahmachari.* He had, for the moment, to forget what he was and what he liked: Govardhan, the cows, the Gopis whom he loved; even Father Nanda and Mother Yashoda, Father Vasudeva and Mother Devaki; even the memory of his exploits and of people's love — even Radha, his goddess of joy.

Guru had entrusted Balarama, Uddhava and Krishna to his nephew Shvetaketu. He was a handsome young man and looked like his uncle. Krishna was told that he was the ablest disciple of the master.

Krishna was now a member of Shvetaketu's group, which consisted, besides the three of them, of the twin Princes of Avanti, Vinda and Anuvinda, who looked so like each other that Krishna often could not say which was which. He could see at once that Vinda and Anuvinda were never able to forget that they were the sons of a king and he was not. Every time he wanted to make friends with them, they made him feel that he was a cowherd's son. They wore their deer skins in a way which showed they did not care for them, and would only go to the princesses to beg their food. Poor things, he had to suffer these vain boys cheerfully.

He had no such vanity; it was wrong to be so exclusive. He promptly accepted Trivakra's invitation to go to her the next day to collect food. She was not a princess, but had a nobler heart than any woman's. And when he went to her quarters in the palace, she had cooked the nicest food with her own hands and offered it to him when he held out the bowl to her.

But wherever he went for food during those few days, Rukmi's sister was sure to be there — of course with Trivakra. She too would insist on putting a fine little morsel in his bowl, whoever the lady giving him the food might be. And every time she did so, she smiled and shot sly glances at him. She was very pretty, but very forward too.

Krishna did not like her brother, it is true; but she was different. She had fine eyes. Her nose was straight. Radha was not like her — Radha was sweetness itself bubbling with spontaneous joy. This Princess was dignified — and perhaps inclined to be domineering. But no, he was wrong to be thinking of girls while he was a *brahmachari.* He had to forget them.

The seventh member of the group was the eighteen-year-old Sudama, or Kuchela as some called him, lean and weak, but very intelligent. He explained everything about himself straight away. His father had come from the distant shores of the sea, somewhere near the sacred Prabhasa Tirtha, where he said all of the others would have to go on a pilgrimage. His father had been Guru Sandipani's friend and colleague, and had known how to chant the *Sama Veda* music to perfection. He was now dead and Sudama was continuing his studies till they were completed.

Sudama himself could also chant the *Sama Veda* hymns to perfection. Krishna heard him with admiration the day after he had joined the Guru. He had been good enough to agree to Krishna's proposal to teach him the *Sama* music.

Krishna's Big Brother was a problem. He had already begun to find the life of a *brahmachari* hard. He missed

the wide spaces of the forest. He was also unhappy that he could not roam at will, nor shout at people, nor get angry and hit some one. He found life monotonous, and constant recitals and discussions boring.

Well, Krishna had to help him overcome his disgust at the new life. Krishna always had to be nice to him without letting him know that he, Krishna, was doing it on purpose, and had to pretend that he had forgotten the *mantras* and ask Balarama to correct him — just to make him memorise them correctly. Every time Krishna learned a ritual, he had to ask Balarama what was the correct way, just to refresh Balarama's memory of it. Balarama knew that Krishna remembered things all right and that this was only Krishna's trick to help him. He never forgot that compared to him Krishna was very intelligent, and he was proud of how clever his brother was. But he never felt jealous, for he loved Krishna and Krishna loved him. And he continued to master all the things that Krishna wanted him to, just to please Krishna.

After five days, Uddhava, Krishna's dear friend, returned from Vrindavan. He told Krishna how all in Vrindavan, old and young, were eagerly awaiting him; how they wanted his exploits to be retold again and again; how they had sent fond messages to say how they found the banks of the Yamuna desolate without him; how even his favourite cows, when Uddhava patted them, felt disconsolate.

Krishna felt unhappy when he learned that Mother Yashoda shed tears when listening to the events that had happened in Mathura and that waking and sleeping she only called upon him.

He felt more unhappy when he heard how absent-mindedly Radha had heard the message he had sent, which had been: 'Radha, you are my goddess of joy. You are always in my heart; so you will remain. Let me know, when I return from the *ashram,* whether you would like to be with me, and I will bring you here.'

And with a choking voice, Uddhava told him the reply she had made. She had taken him to the favourite grove where Krishna used to be with her, and asked him, 'Isn't my Kahn here ?' Then she took him to the tree under which Krishna had sat with her, and asked him, 'Don't you hear his flute?'

Uddhava said he was amazed, for she was as happy as ever. Then she turned to him and said: 'You are blind, Uddhava, and also deaf. He is here, my Kahn; he lives and moves with me; he is with me wherever I am; what more do I want?'

Uddhava confessed to Krishna that he had been unhappy at her talking in this way. But he found her very happy, wandering on the banks of the Yamuna and playing Krishna's flute.

Uddhava could not understand her. Krishna could. She lived only in him. He might be Krishna to others; to her he was 'my Kahn' who lived with her all the time.

And his heart became pure and joyous as he thought of Radha's devotion, which had transmuted his relationship to her into a thing of exquisite beauty.

6

THE WANDERING SCHOOL OF SANDIPANI

On the twenty-fifth day after the death of Kamsa, Acharya Sandipani and his wandering school took the road along the banks of the Yamuna.

In the morning, long before dawn, Sandipani and his pupils took their sacred bathe in the Yamuna, performed their *sandhya*[1] on her banks and started for the outskirts of Mathura to wait for the others.

Soon the royal guests, accompanied by Ugrasena, Akrura, Pradyota and other Yadava chiefs of a higher rank, came there, for the Princes were also to set out for their respective capitals at the same time as Sandipani. Their chariots, horses and the carts which carried their belongings, followed them at a distance.

The guests had belonged to the group of princes who, under Kamsa's leadership, had accepted Jarasandha's hegemony, and all the efforts of Vasudeva and Akrura to bind them in a closer alliance with the Yadavas had failed. The cordiality between guests and hosts had been formal and correct, but the purpose of keeping them there had been frustrated mainly due to the hostility of Rukmi, the son of Bhishmaka, the powerful King of the Bhojas of Vidarbha.

Vasudeva, Devaki, Rohini and his other wives, together with members of the families of some of the chiefs, also came there to bid good-bye to Krishna and Balarama. Trivakra was there with her unfailing box of scents and unguents to offer to the Princes and to bid a loving farewell to Krishna.

The townsmen had already begun to gather on the spot and soon a huge crowd surrounded the departing caravan.

Devaki's eyes were fixed on Krishna. She was happy to have regained her boy, of whom she had dreamt for the last sixteen years, and miserable, to have to part with him for a considerable time. But things had to be so.

She was very glad that her son had rejected the rulership of Mathura and gladder than ever that under a master like Sandipani, his education, neglected so far, would be completed.

When the golden rays of the as-yet-un-risen sun barred the sky, Sandipani blew his conch. The auspicious moment for beginning the journey had arrived. Then, with head bent and eyes closed, the Guru took water from his bowl and offered *arghya* — worship — to the Sun as a God.

King Ugrasena applied *kumkum* to the forehead of each of the royal guests in turn, placing in his hands the auspicious gift of a cocoanut, and spreading on his shoulders a gold-embroidered shawl.

Vasudeva, Devaki and Rohini breathed in the scent of the hair of the three boys, — for Uddhava, as the inseparable companion of Krishna, had been like a son to them — smeared sandalwood paste on their foreheads and placed cocoanuts in their hands.

Trivakra, not to be behind, smiled at every royal guest and sprinkled scents on their hands. She could not sprinkle scents on the Guru, nor on the three *brahmacharis,* for the rules of discipleship forbade celibate students the use of scents and unguents. Then she fell at the feet of Krishna, restraining her sobs with great difficulty for it was inauspicious to shed tears when bidding farewell.

King Ugrasena finally blessed the three boys by placing his hand on the head of each boy. Then he touched the feet of Guru Sandipani — and so did all the chiefs.

After the farewell had been bidden, the caravan, led by Sandipani, staff in hand, took to the road which skirted the banks of the Yamuna.

The wandering school of Sandipani was regulated by strict discipline, though quite a few of the pupils were

princes, including Vinda and Anuvinda, the twin princes of Avanti.

The school always camped for the night near some village which had a river or a stream within easy reach. So, before the morning star rose, the master and his pupils rose from their deer skins which served them as beds by night and clothing by day and protected them against inclement weather.

Then they went to the river or the stream nearby for their bathe; offered worship to the Sun as a God, in knee-deep water; came out to practise the chanting of the Vedic *mantras* in the tones in which the Venerable Veda Vyasa had cast them.

After the chants had been duly recited, the school partook of milk if the residents of the nearby village chose to offer it to them, and started on their journey. The pupils walked in groups of five or six in charge of a senior student who, as they walked together, taught the new pupils the Vedic chants and the rules of grammar. Each group was usually accompanied by some senior disciple who taught, as they walked, the canons of *Dharma Shastra* or the tenets of some new school of thought or the rules of war or polity.

The Guru and his pupils walked on till the sun rose high and the heat became unbearable. Then they encamped under a banyan tree or a grove of other trees. If a village was nearby, the pupils, with their bowls in their hands, went to beg for food, while Sandipani sat offering oblations to the sacred fire lit for the purpose.

So long as the Princes followed the same route as the school, they rode in their chariots or on their horses in advance and selected the site for a camp. Their retainers would then prepare their food for them as well as for Sandipani and his pupils.

The pupils then, each with a bowl in his hand, would proceed to the place where the Princesses were sitting and recite the formula, *Bhavati, bhiksham dehi* (Lady, give me

food by way of alms). They were not allowed to speak any other words. And the Princesses would respond by putting food into each bowl.

Rukmini had had no idea how strictly Sandipani's school would behave. She thought at one time that travelling in the same caravan she would have a better chance of meeting the dark-skinned young man for whom her heart was mad within her. When the journey started and she climbed on to the chariot in which she was to travel, she had a glimpse of Krishna. How different he looked, she thought, with his beautiful curls shaven off, his body wrapped in a deer skin and a staff and a bowl in his hands !

However, she could not resist the temptation of seeing him as often as she could. Whenever the pupils of Sandipani came to ask for food, she would push everybody aside and be there in front to drop the food in Krishna's bowl. Other Princesses smiled, giggled and exchanged meaningful glances about this forward, headstrong Princess of the King of Vidarbha. But there was no resisting her. Her brother's wife had sunk into sullen hostility; she and her husband had found it impossible to keep this wilful and forward girl in check. She was cunning; she had a difficult nature; she found a retort for every rebuke administered to her. There was no use making scenes with so many princes and princesses about them.

Whenever Rukmini came forward to give him food, Krishna looked steadily at her. He did not respond to her smile. His syes alone told her that he had understood her infatuation; that he was ready to go through the discipline of studentship with absolute thoroughness and that for the moment he had forsworn laughter and joy.

After the morning meal, the school would take a siesta. When the heat became bearable, it would begin its journey and with it its educational activity. When the evening came, the school would camp again under the cover of a grove of trees. Wrestling would then start, after which the master and his disciples would take their bathe, offer their

prayers, partake of food, and then spreading their deer skins on the bare earth lie down for the night.

Krishna kept his love of beauty, of flowers and feathers, of song and dance, under strict control. His body and mind were attuned to the new discipline which he loved with overpowering zest. Shvetaketu, the leader of his group, had never seen a pupil with such a receptive mind. Once a *mantra* had been chanted, Krishna would reproduce it with meticulous accuracy. If a canon of conduct was once explained to him, he would never forget it, would enter into its spirit and follow it up in the minutest detail. His education had been neglected so far, and he appeared to be determined to make up for this with passionate intensity. And everything which the discipline enjoined, he did with a cheerful alacrity.

But there was a quality in his relationship with the members of his group, which even Sandipani had never seen before in any other pupil. He could establish friendship with any one who came in contact with him. He did it with such sincerity that no one could help loving him. He served all with a cheerfulness which made even the proud Princes of Avanti feel small.

No one could match Krishna and Balarama at running and wrestling. But wrestling with Krishna was not a battle with skill and strength. It was a struggle in which the wrestling skill of a champion was always pitted against a powerful mind which foresaw every one of his moods and thrusts and took advantage of every physical and mental weakness in his opponent.

Soon a close friendship sprang up between Shvetaketu and the members of his group. Only Vinda and Anuvinda struggled their hardest to stand on their royal dignity. But they stood in fear of Balarama and began to behave themselves correctly as soon as the young giant gave them a look.

The caravan slowly travelled along the banks of the Charmanvati (modern Chambal). The Princes, one after the other, parted from the wandering school and went their

way. After a month and a half, Sandipani and his pupils arrived at the *ashram* in Avanti.

Every year, Guru Sandipani made two pilgrimages — one to Kurukshetra where the Venerable Veda Vyasa had his *ashram,* and the other to the holy Prabhasa Tirtha on the shore of the sea, because a bathe there, where three rivers met the sea, was considered most sacred on the day of the full-moon. However, the time to depart on this journey to the seashore had not yet come, and Krishna and Balarama were being taken through an intensive training in the use of arms.

Day after day, morning, noon and evening, under the direction of the Guru himself, they practised archery and wielded the mace and the battle-axe in the way the master taught them. Balarama, with his great height and power of muscles, soon excelled in wielding the mace. He had the temperament of a tornado when he was roused, and loved the weapon which would enable him to smash his way through a crowd of hostile warriors.

On the other hand, of all the arms, Krishna liked the *chakra.* From his boyhood, he had an unerring eye and accuracy of aim in throwing a noose round the neck of an obstinate bull. He had lassoed the Kaliya Snake under impossible conditions. And he could easily master the art of whirling the discus round his forefinger and speeding it by giving it a circulatory twist, which, after cutting the target in two, would return to him. Few experts known to Sandipani had mastered the use of this very difficult weapon. But to Krishna it was a weapon of weapons.

For sixty-four days Krishna and Balarama underwent training in arms. Then Sandipani and his wandering school started for Bhrigu Tirtha, from where they took boats for Prabhasa Tirtha.

7

THE PUNYAJANA SHIP

Guru Sandipani and his pupils went to Prabhasa Tirtha (modern Prabhas) travelling in boats from Bhrigu Tirtha (modern Broach).

Krishna, who had never seen the sea before, fell in love with its constant motion and imperturbable immensity. He also occupied himself with learning how to row and navigate a boat on the sea.

They had six boats in all, which skirted the coast leisurely. Sandipani, because of his annual visits, was known and respected throughout the coastal area, and wherever the boats touched they were received cordially. When the school reached Prabhasa, it was heartily welcomed by the King, who always looked forward to the annual visit of Guru Sandipani. The coast of Saurashtra was studded with Aryan settlements, and the arrival of any Aryan sage was to them a great event, celebrated with great joy. During his stay, the Guru set up a temporary school, headed by his leading disciple Shvetaketu, which men of all ages attended to learn the *shastras* as well as to acquire skill in arms. To experts, he also taught how to make and use arms which needed greater skill. His disciples also had the opportunity of spreading Aryan influence by going into neighbouring settlements.

Prabhasa was a large settlement. Besides colonies of Aryans, the bulk of its population consisted of a people who were dark and of short stature, but very adventurous, friendly and hospitable. They lived in houses made of baked clay, neatly arranged in streets. They had public baths attached to the shrines where they worshipped Shiva, not in the form of the *linga* as in Mathura, but as the clay

image of a naked human being seated in a firm *yogic* posture. The people of Prabhasa had ships of their own and traded with Bhrigu Tirtha and other coastal ports.[1] They spoke a language difficult to understand. But there were quite a few among them who had travelled widely in the country and, being initiated in Aryan ways, spoke the cultured Aryan tongue[2] which was usually referred to as the language of the Gods on account of the *Vedas* having been disclosed by the Gods in that language. There were colonies of Aryans too around Prabhasa, who naturally welcomed Guru Sandipani with great enthusiasm.

Sandipani's school settled down near the temple of the God Surya on the seashore. Every day the master and his disciples took their ritual bathe in the sea two times. The routine life of the school, however, was altered often to meet the needs of the local population. Then, trained disciples taught the *Vedas* and the sacrificial rituals to the local students in the morning, and in the evening those who cared to be trained in the use of arms received their lessons.

No sooner did Guru Sandipani see the sea, than he lost his usual equanimity. It reminded him of the greatest tragedy of his life. The year before, when on a pilgrimage to Prabhasa Tirtha, his only son, Punardatta, had been kidnapped by the Punyajana demons who often came to the port of Prabhasa to trade.

One day, at midnight, when the sea was flooded by moonlight, Krishna saw the Guru walking along the shore, his eyes gazing fixedly at the distant horizon. He could guess the reason for this unhappiness : the Guru was, of course, thinking of his kidnapped son.

He got up from his deer skin, wrapped it round himself and went to the spot where the Guru, lost in sad memories, was pacing the seashore.

As Sandipani saw Krishna coming, he turned to him and wiped a tear.

'My son, why have you come here at this time?' he asked in a trembling voice.

'My Master, I know what is making you unhappy,' said Krishna. 'Can I not do anything to relieve you of your distress? You have called me your favourite pupil. You have been to me more than a father. Let me do something to make you happy,' Krishna added with folded hands.

'What can you do, Krishna? No one can make me happy. You will realise this only when you have a son of your own whom you love more than your life and who has been snatched away from you by cruel demons.' Krishna listened to the master quietly.

'The son is one's own self, projected into the future,' continued Sandipani. 'In life, he is your staff; in death, he saves you from hell. He can never be replaced and never can he be forgotten.'

'I have heard from Acharya Shvetaketu how the Punyajanas kidnapped him last year. Was no attempt made to rescue him?' asked Krishna.

Sandipani shook his head sadly and pointed to the distant horizon where a ship, which looked no bigger than a thumb, was coming into view.

'You see that dark spot. It is Panchajana coming again. He belongs to a tribe known as Punyajana who some years ago captured Kushasthali (modern Dwaraka) from King Kukudmin, now a wanderer on the face of the earth. He came in the same way last year. He comes here every year to trade, stays on his ship near the harbour for some days and then goes away. The Gods alone know where, though he is said to live in Patala,[3]' said Sandipani with a sigh.

'On the last day of their visit last year, Punardatta went to the sea to bathe. He was a year older than you, Vaasudeva. He was a fine, clever boy, who, I had hoped, would carry forward the work and tradition of Sandipani.' The Guru sighed again as he gazed at the sea reminiscently.

'The Punyajana demons kidnapped him, took to their ship and sailed away. My poor boy! With his gentle nature,

it must have broken his heart to be separated from me. And, God of all gods, when I think what fate he must have met with, what cruel strangers he must have had to live with, my heart breaks ...' A sob shook the voice of the Master. 'They are coming back now. I can destroy them or sink their ship. But that will not bring back my boy. Even if I try, they may take revenge by putting an end to his life.'

Krishna thought for a while. 'Gurudeva, suppose I try to find him?'

'You can't find him,' said Sandipani. 'Punyajana ships go to all the seven seas. They go to lands of which we know nothing. Some say they go to Patala and even to the worlds where fierce, dark demons live. Punardatta may have been sold in some such land, who knows? He may have been killed as an offering to some wicked god of the demons.'

'Well, I shall try to find that out,' said Krishna.

'You will only invite for yourself a fate similar to Punardatta's, Krishna,' said the Guru, putting his hand affectionately on the shoulders of his beloved pupil.

'Gurudeva, let me try to find out all about the Punyajana ship which is now coming to Prabhasa. It may or may not be the same as came last year. But permit me to do what I can. This will be my gurudakshina,[4]' said Krishna. 'And tomorrow, release me from the laws of a *brahmachari* if you wish.'

'I want to ask you to abandon your idea. But if you pursue it, you will have my blessing. But if something happens to you, how shall I face Prince Vasudeva and Princess Devaki?' asked Sandipani.

'Please tell them that I have gone to vindicate Dharma — to punish the wicked kidnappers,' replied Krishna.

Uddhava was Krishna's earliest playmate. He had completely dedicated himself to his friend, carrying out his slightest unspoken wishes, helping him in all ways and rejoicing in his glory. He joined Krishna in making inqui-

ries about the Punyajana ship and would not hear of being left behind when his friend made the final decision.

On the fourth night, the master of the Punyajana ship, Panchajana, had made his last deal in Prabhasa and left in a small boat for his ship which was anchored a little out to sea.

About midnight, Krishna and Uddhava swam to where the ship lay anchored, and clambered up its side. The night pilot, an old, withered, dark-skinned man, with a white beard, caught them. He knew the Aryan tongue a little and demanded of them what they wanted.

'We want to go with you, Uncle,' said Krishna with a smile. 'You took away our brother Punardatta last year. We can't live without him. So we want you to take us with you.'

Old Bhikru was surprised at the temerity of the two young men. People were mortally afraid of the Punyajana chief who came to Prabhasa every year in his ship, and so far no one from Prabhasa had had the courage to come to their ship.

He was at first suspicious. He thought Krishna and Uddhava were thieves and he expected them to swim back immediately the ship weighed anchor. But his suspicions were allayed once the anchor was in fact weighed and the ship began to gather speed on a sea which was ebbing fast. He sent for ropes, tied the hands and feet of Krishna and Uddhava, a process to which they cheerfully submitted, took them near the rudder and sat down in front of them. For a time no one spoke, only the heaving of the sea and the creaking of the ship disturbing the silence.

'You have a wonderful ship, Uncle. How many years have you been a pilot?' Krishna asked, finally breaking the silence.

'I? Oh,' laughed the old pilot. 'I have been a pilot since I was a little boy. My father was a pilot; so was my uncle.'

'It must be great fun travelling over the sea day and night,' said Krishna. 'I would love to be a pilot, Uncle. You go to so many lands, see so many people, and feel fresh and young every day. Won't you teach me how to sail the ship?'

'If you want to learn and live with me, I will teach you,' said Bhikru with a sailor's loud laugh. 'There is nothing so glorious as to cut your way through the waves.'

'Oh, your ship is a very fine one.'

'It was tarred and caulked at Kushasthali only last month,' said the pilot.

'What sort of *rakshasas* stay there?' asked Krishna.

'They belong to the master's tribe. Oosh!' said Bhikru as if he did not like the Punyajanas but would not say so.

The ship sailed on, Krishna talked on, and the old pilot told strange tales of the sea till the morning broke.

Then Bhikru unbound the young men and took them to the front of the ship where Panchajana, the Punyajana chief, stood, a fat, stout man, who wore an unkempt beard which added to the ferocious appearance of his scarred face. His body was bare except for a loin-cloth and some rich gaudy ornaments on his neck and wrists. He also wore a short sword at his hips, suspended by a silver band encircling his waist and had a rope-end in his hand, the emblem of his authority, with which he often swished the backs of his subordinates.

He was attended by two swarthy giants, who had long whips in their hands. They had curly hair, thick lips and powerful muscles. They were the personal attendants of Panchajana and kept order on the ship.

After Bhikru had told his chief how the two young men had arrived on the ship, Krishna saluted Panchajana and spoke to him with respect.

'Noble Chief, we have come to you because we want to join Punardatta, who went away with you last year. We loved him as our brother. We can't bear being parted from him. We want you to take us to him,' said Krishna.

Panchajana appraised the beauty and grace of the boys, smiled in his beard and promised to take them to Punardatta. They were sure to fetch a big price, he thought.

Krishna, however, begged to be excused when Panchajana invited them to live with him and his nephews in the two cabins which their ship boasted and which they occupied.

'We have promised Bhikru to live with him and learn sailing,' said Krishna.

The Punyajana chief laughed. 'How can you work with your slender bodies? Look at your hands. Even my daughters have tougher hands.'

'We can't be a burden to you, Chief. We must earn our living by helping Bhikru and the other sailors,' said Krishna.

This did not suit Panchajana. He wanted the young men to remain as fresh and graceful as they were, so that they would be precious merchandise in the land to which he was sailing. But he did not know how to force an idle life on Krishna and Uddhava if they wanted to be up and doing.

'All right,' said the chief waving the rope-end. 'Bhikru, you look after these boys properly. But see that they don't overwork or have their skin tanned by the sun. Otherwise, I will have you thrashed.'

Panchajana significantly glanced at the giants who stood behind him with whips in their hands.

'As the master pleases,' said Bhikru.

Bhikru liked the two young men who were so anxious to learn navigation from him, and introduced them to his grandson who, incidentally, was called Kukkura.

Soon Kukkura also took a liking to the boys, though he could not talk any language which Krishna understood. They tried to make themselves understood by gestures.

Between the two of them, Krishna and Uddhava elicited information about Punardatta. He had been taken by Panchajana to Patala and then to Vaivasvatapuri, the City

of the Sun, and was bought by its king. In fact, the ship was now sailing for that very port. It was a strange land where the queen was the Divine Mother and the king was the God of Death, they learnt.

The Punyajana chief became very gracious to Krishna, called him often to his cabin and made him sit by his side, and assured him that he would take him to Punardatta. Krishna did not like his leer, saw through the intentions of the demon and tried to keep him at a distance.

Every afternoon, Panchajana came to the deck and blew the beautiful pink-coloured conch which he wore by a strap round his shoulders. All the members of the crew, except the rowers at the lower deck, answered the summons by coming and prostrating themselves before him. But the rowers at the upper and lower decks exchanged places every day, and the master of the ship had everyone before him every two days.

He would then stand, a nephew on each side, and the two giants, Hukku and Hullu, a little away in front. After every one had saluted him and had a tap with the rope-end, he would issue orders to the crew for the night. This was also the time when Panchajana would punish disobedient hands on the ship.

Two days after Krishna came on board, when Panchajana held a court, he saw the ship's young carpenter Raddu being brought up by Hukku for disobedience of some kind. On this occasion Panchajana looked terrible. He rolled his eyes. He foamed at the mouth. He kicked the carpenter when he fell at his feet to ask for mercy.

Then he ordered Hukku to whip him. The giant stepped forward, wielded his long whip and lashed the shrieking carpenter six times. When the lashing was finished, Raddu sank to the ground, his back lacerated by bleeding wounds, whining in a piteous way.

That night, when all had retired, Krishna, who slept on the deck, went up to Bhikru where he sat beside the rudder.

'Bhikru, why was the carpenter thrashed so mercilessly?' he asked.

Bhikru sighed. 'He did not repair the master's cabin properly. The master was very angry,' he said.

'It was wicked, the way the young man was thrashed,' commented Krishna. 'He could not repair the cabin properly because he had fever.'

'Oh, this happens to someone or other every third day. Don't you worry. When the master gets angry, no one knows what he will do. I have known him throw a man into the sea,' said Bhikru.

'Where does the carpenter sleep?' asked Krishna. 'I want to go to him.'

Bhikru shook his head. 'The master does not permit any one to go near a man who is being punished. He has to be left alone for a whole night. Whoever disobeys that order will also be punished.'

'Send Kukkura to show us where the carpenter is sleeping,' said Krishna. 'I will brave the punishment if it comes to that.'

Kukkura was afraid of even leading Krishna and Uddhava to the hold where the injured carpenter lay. He anxiously peered on all sides to find out whether one or other of the swarthy giants was following them, for they prowled about the deck and in the hold every night to find out if there was anything unusual happening on the ship. Kukkura pointed out the spot where the injured man lay, and slipped away.

Krishna sat near Raddu who lay moaning in pain, and softly patted him on the back. The man sat up in fright. He thought that one of the black giants was at him again. Then, in the light of the rising moon which penetrated through the porthole, he recognised the two fair young men who had clambered up the side of the ship two days ago, and was amazed. How could any one dare to approach a culprit the same day that he was punished?

Krishna, without a word, first soothingly patted the man and then, without saying a word, enveloped him in his arms with great affection. The man had never seen such kindness before and leaned his head on Krishna's chest and sobbed. Uddhava carefully brushed away the dirt which had gathered round the lacerations on the man's back. They could not exchange any words lest the attention of the prowlers might be attracted. But Krishna held the man in his arms till he stopped crying and went to sleep, enveloped in affectionate warmth.

Krishna and Uddhava left the man only after he was asleep, when they went back to lie in the places allotted to them on the deck.

'Krishna, we are in for punishment ourselves,' said Uddhava.

'We must share the plight of those in distress,' said Krishna.

8

SECURING THE *PANCHAJANYA* CONCH

The next morning, Raddu, the carpenter, in spite of the injuries he had received, went to work, after the old pilot had applied balm to his injuries. But his eyes sought the strangers all the time, for his heart was full of the way Krishna had sat for so long, holding him in his arms, disregarding the penalty which he was sure to attract.

Soon, how Krishna and Uddhava had helped the carpenter at the risk of inviting punishment was furtively whispered in low tones and went the round of the whole crew. And the hearts of these men, whose lives hung on the slender thread of Panchajana's goodwill, warmed towards their new-found friends.

The ship sailed on. Panchajana and his two nephews continued to treat Krishna and Uddhava with apparent kindness. The giants went about their duty lash in hand. The crew laboured hard at the sails and the oars.

On the third day, the ship anchored at a coastal port which they said was Kushasthali and which the Punyajana demons had taken possession of from its king Kukudmin. Panchajana and his nephews went on shore with two hands and returned in the evening with an ample supply of water and other necessities.

The next day, another young man, barely seventeen, was brought up before the chief for some misconduct. He was also awarded six lashes which Hullu, the other giant, administered. The boy writhed, shrieked and sobbed in pain, as he lashed on, and Panchajana looked on with a happy smile.

When night came, and Panchajana and his nephews retired to rest, Krishna and Uddhava went to the injured

boy as he lay in a distant corner of the lower deck and was crying his heart out in solitary distress.

Krishna stroked his head and then held the boy in his arms. Uddhava sponged his wounds with a rag wetted in the little drinking water which he had saved from his allotted quota.

Members of the crew, one by one, stealthily passed on the other side of the deck to see for themselves what the two young strangers were doing.

The boy had been stolen from some port a few months ago and had had no one so far to show him any affection. When he saw the affection which Krishna was lavishing on him, he clung to Krishna and cried like a little child. Krishna responded by a loving embrace till his sobs subsided.

As the boy fell asleep in his arms, Krishna could sense that an ominous presence was behind him. He placed the head of the boy on the ground softly and turned round.

Hukku, one of the giants, with a lash in his hand, was towering over him.

'Uddhava, don't move. Stand where you are and face the demon,' Krishna said.

In the dim light of the late moon, which was just rising, the giant recognised the two strangers. He knew that they were the master's favourites and could not be treated as members of the crew. But he had his orders. He laid his hands, one on the shoulder of each of them and growled some order in a strange tongue, and marched them off, pushing them forward towards the steps which led to the hold.

The injured boy awoke from his slumber when Krishna spoke to Uddhava, and saw that they were being taken away by the swarthy giant. He shook off his sleep, forgot the pain and stealthily crawled towards the stern where the old pilot sat, his eyes fixed on the stars to see that the ship sailed the right path.

Hukku, the swarthy giant, with bulging eyes and curly hair, pushed Krishna and Uddhava down to the hold, where, in the midst of the merchandise, there was a big wooden cage. He opened its padlock, pushed Krishna and Uddhava in it, bolted and padlocked it and went away. This part of the hold, where the cage had been kept, was a filthy place with only two small holes to let in air from the deck. The different varieties of merchandise added their odour to the foul smell of the cage itself. Uddhava felt sick.

Some time passed, during which both of them tried to sleep. But Krishna heard someone breathing, and became alert.

'Krishna,' came the soft whisper of Bhikru, 'are you there?'

'Yes. What is it?' asked Krishna.

'The master has ordered me to change the course of the ship. We are not going to Vaivasvatapuri,' said Bhikru.

'Where are we going then?' asked Krishna.

'Far away, towards Shonitapuri,' said Bhikru.

Krishna now understood why the day before such a large quantity of necessities had been brought on the ship.

'What do you think is his object?' asked Krishna.

'Perhaps he wants to go on some other land and sell you to some king for a high price,' said Bhikru.

'Bhikru, we have to go to Vaivasvatapuri. We have to bring back Punardatta,' said Krishna.

'You cannot go there. The master won't permit it,' said Bhikru.

'Then we will do it without the master's permission,' said Krishna. 'Can you open the padlock?'

'The key is with Hukku,' said Bhikru.

'Can I break through the cage?' asked Krishna.

'If you do, the master will kill you. He has done such things before,' said Bhikru.

'If I break through the wooden bars, can the carpenter Raddu put them right before the morning?' asked Krishna.

'Let me go and ask him,' said Bhikru, as he stealthily crawled back to the deck.

'Even if he does not, we are coming out,' said Krishna.

Krishna and Uddhava held a consultation and examined the sides of the cage. On one side, they found that one of the wooden bars was shaky. With pressure exerted by them both jointly, the bar broke and they came out of the cage. On the way to the deck, they met Raddu, the carpenter, stealing his way into the hold.

When the dawn broke, Hukku, the swarthy giant, who had locked up Krishna and Uddhava in the cage, came to the prow and saw them standing, offering their prayers to the rising sun. He rubbed his eyes; he pinched himself. Yes, there they were on the deck in spite of the fact that they had been locked in the cage. He still could not believe his eyes. He rushed down to the hold to see if they were in the cage. They were not. He examined its sides with his hands; it had not been broken open.

In the obscure mind of Hukku, brought up in some lonely desert far across the sea, there lurked the fear of wicked spirits who could fly through the air or dive into the sea; who could, when angry, burn homes or blow away villages or destroy cattle; who, if offended, could strike men down with dire disease. These two young men had come to the ship from nowhere; behaved unafraid in their presence as if they had seen no one; and now emerged from the cage without breaking it. A curious light of mixed fear and respect came into the eyes of the giant. Were they such spirits? He shuddered; went up to the deck praying to his guardian fetish for protection; reported the matter to his master, and went to take Hullu into his confidence.

When they both came up to the prow with their whips in their hands, Panchajana was there, standing in front of Krishna, his eyes aflame with wrath.

'Where were you last night?' he demanded.

'Who, we?' asked Krishna in unconcern, smiling indulgently as he returned the terrifying glance of Pan-

chajana. 'Hukku must have told you where we were. We were trying to send the boy, whom you got whipped yesterday, to sleep.'

'How dare you?' roared Panchajana. 'It is no business of yours.'

'It was not our business; it was our Dharma. You inflicted pain; we tried to relieve it,' said Krishna, as if explaining the difficulty to a little boy.

'Don't you know my orders? You cannot do such things here,' said Panchajana, trying to give him the benefit of the doubt.

'We know your orders. But our Dharma was to go to the help of the poor injured boy,' Krishna said provocatively.

'How dare you? I am the master here, you insolent animals. And — yes, I forgot — Hukku reported this morning that you were locked up in the cage,' shouted the chief.

'Yes, we were,' said Krishna.

'You broke through it, you — you —'

In reply, Krishna laughed so mockingly, that Panchajana was choked with rage.

'How did you come out of the cage?' asked Panchajana, when he had found his voice.

The chief's angry question, shouted in a loud voice, had attracted his nephews, as well as Hukku, Hullu and a few others of the crew. Not to let it appear that his authority was flouted, he, therefore, decided to teach these youngsters a lesson then and there. He shouted, 'Hukku, come here.'

Hukku looked at his master, Krishna and Uddhava in turn, and walked up to the chief with a halting step. There was a sudden wind; the ship lurched; every one kept his balance with some difficulty. Hukku, from the corner of his eye, could see that soon there would be a squall. His heart gave a throb. He was familiar with such premonitory signs of coming disaster, when wicked spirits were angry.

Krishna smiled at the giant as he came near them.

'Hukku, did you lock these fellows up last night properly?' asked Panchajana.

'Yes, master,' said the giant, raising a hand to his forehead and bowing his head.

'Were you awake or dreaming?' demanded the master.

'Awake, master. I locked them up with my own hands,' the giant said as if doubtful of what he was saying.

'Then they broke open the cage and came out?' asked the chief.

Hukku looked down, his lips twitching.

'Speak out. They broke open the cage, din't they?'

Hukku mumbled a prayer to his protecting fetish, hesitated for a while and then said in a trembling voice, 'Master, the cage is intact; it is not broken.'

'What!' exclaimed Panchajana in amazement, and turned to his elder nephew. 'Nephew, go and see whether Hukku tells the truth.'

Every one stood silent, Panchajana frowning heavily.

The nephew of the chief returned. 'Uncle, the cage is intact and padlocked,' he said.

Panchajana eyed Krishna and Uddhava suspiciously. 'How did you come out?' he asked them, baffled.

'Find out for yourselves,' said Krishna with a smile so indulgent that it again exasperated the chief.

'All right, I let you go this time. But if you dare go near any person who is punished, I will have your bones broken,' said the chief.

'We are going to look after every one whom you have whipped,' replied Krishna.

'You shall not,' Panchajana roared.

'We shall,' Krishna was firm.

The persons gathered there could understand the tenor of the conversation, and could not repress their smiles. Panchajana glared at them and decided to set an example by punishing this defiance.

'You shall not,' he shouted. 'Hukku, give this boy four lashes.'

Hukku stood hesitant, fear written on his face, eyeing Krishna with a timidity which he had never been known to have exhibited. The members of the crew stood amazed.

'Come on, lash these fellows.'

Bhikru was suddenly moved to intervene. He fell at Panchajana's feet and begged, with hands uplifted, for mercy for Krishna.

'Stop mumbling, you fool,' Panchajana shouted, raising a hand to strike the old pilot. Then he changed his mind and turned to Hukku telling him with a gesture to carry out his order.

Krishna stood unaffected, looking at what was happening with mild amusement.

Hukku's hands trembled as he took a step towards Krishna, so haltingly, that Panchajana lost his patience. He snatched the whip from Hukku's hand.

'Take this, you insolent brats,' he shouted.

The sailors who had collected there almost stopped breathing. Their hearts went out to Krishna, whom they had already begun to regard with affection.

Panchajana was not a practised hand at using a whip with the long sort of whipcord, which was generally used for driving cattle. The whip came down on Krishna's back with a whishing sound, leaving a red mark.

With a sudden movement Krishna caught hold of the whipcord and jerked the whip out of Panchajana's hand. With the sure eyes of one familiar with cattle-driving all his life, he laid it on Panchajana himself.

A cry of horror escaped every lip : the irresistible chief was being whipped !

Hullu stepped forward to help his master, but Hukku was so fascinated that he drew his brother back. Krishna lashed out with an expert hand. The long lash encirled the fat body of Panchajana; bit into his flesh venomously; unwound itself with swift precision; and came down again

and again, lacerating the flesh. Panchajana was in terrible pain, shrieked aloud and asked for help.

Hukku and Hullu would not move. They now enjoyed the fate of the cruel master who had so often threatened to kill them. His nephews just fled to the cabins.

Krishna triumphantly lashed out for all he was worth, till Panchajana fell down on the deck, bleeding. Then he handed back the whip to Hukku with a smile, appreciating what he had done.

Both the giants were lost in admiration at this boy's performance. They had been handling lashes all their lives, but never, never could they have dreamt of the lash being used with such swift dexterity and unerring thoroughness. They looked upon Krishna with a new respect, added to Hukku's feeling that he was some spirit armed with miraculous power.

Panchajana lay on the deck in a faint. Krishna turned to Uddhava. 'Uddhava, take Panchajana to his cabin. I am coming.'

He made a sign to Hukku to help Uddhava to remove the chief.

'Bhikru, turn the course of the ship. We are going to Vaivasvatapuri,' he commanded.

Bhikru prostrated himself before Krishna and left to carry out his orders.

Panchajana's conch, which summoned the crew, lay on the ground — small in size, pink in colour and faultless in shape. Krishna applied it to his mouth, played upon it to announce the event, and was fascinated with the rich musical notes which issued from it. 'I will take this conch. I have never seen such a thing of beauty, nor heard such wonderful tones. I shall call it *Panchajanya,* the gift of Panchajana,' he told Uddhava.

The members of the crew, who had suffered long and bitterly under their ruthless master, gratefully saluted Krishna and left to attend to their work.

Krishna went to Panchajana's cabin and, with Uddhava's help, washed his wounds and bandaged them. The pilot brought a balm, which they applied to his injuries.

While he was being bandaged, the chief opened his eyes, recognised Krishna and began to abuse him filthily. Krishna tried to soothe him, but Panchajana continued to work himself into a rage as he lay in his bunk there and hurl abuse at Krishna in every language he knew.

Uddhava pulled the nephews of Panchajana out of their hiding places and left them in charge of their uncle.

The ship continued to sail merrily. The crew was in a happy mood. Krishna and Uddhava went about helping them as before. The evening meal was no longer meagre, but became a feast, with which every one felt he was celebrating his own liberation.

Night came. Every one retired to rest, except the pilot, the night watchman and the giants. Under the pilot's instructions, his grandson slept with Krishna and Uddhava.

It was after midnight that, with his alert senses, Krishna felt some presence drawing near. He sat up trying to peer into the darkness.

He could see a dark crouching form coming near him with what looked like a short sword uplifted. He jumped up and caught hold of Panchajana's hand which had been raised to kill him.

Suddenly another dark form towered above Panchajana, sprang upon him from behind, lifted him up in powerful arms and flung him over the deck.

The ship passed on as the sea swept away the struggling form of its master, and the star-studded sky looked down in all its splendour.

9

THE CITY OF LIGHT

The Punyajana ship took on a new character. Foodstuffs, stored in ample measure, were made available to the crew in generous measure. The hoards of valuables and merchandise were classified and re-arranged. New loincloths were distributed to the crew, who so far had had only tattered strips of cloth to hide their nakedness.

Krishna also discovered a hidden stock of arms, which was placed in charge of Uddhava. Weapons were distributed to the nephews of Panchajana, Kukkura, the grandson of the pilot, Raddu, the carpenter, and two other young men. Krishna also began to train them in the use of arms.

The nephews of Panchajana, who were in mortal fright, were assured of their safety and their position as the owners of the ship. Bhikru, the pilot, was placed in charge. Hukku and Hullu now went about as watchmen, but without whips in their hand.

From out of the stock, Krishna and Uddhava selected clothes and ornaments, and also two fine copper swords for their own use.

Now they were nearing Vaivasvatapuri, and Bhikru told Krishna all he knew about it.

Vaivasvatapuri or the City of the Sun was situated in Nagaloka near Patala and was ruled by a family of Nagakanyas, snake-maidens, who could fight like men. The queen, being the incarnation of the Mother Goddess, Ma, possessed miraculous powers. The king, her husband, was only the first servant of the queen. Punardatta, Bhikru told Krishna, was bought by the queen for a large price, possibly to marry one of the princesses.

After some days, they sailed into the creek on which stood the city. In the rays of the setting sun, the city, surrounded by a stone wall, glowed as if made of burnished gold. There were a large number of crafts in the harbour, which were evidently used for fishing. There was a small jetty tied to the land by ropes.

Beyond the open square in front of the jetty broad steps led up to the fort on a height.

When the ship came in sight of the fort, they saw a crowd gathered on the steps waiting for the ship. Krishna told Uddhava, Raddu and one of the Punyajana boys who knew the language of the town a little, to go to the town and ask the permission of the queen to land. They left the ship in a boat carrying some small presents for the authorities.

The next morning, a glittering throng gathered on the broad steps which led down from the gates of the fort to the jetty, to receive Krishna. Uddhava was rowed back to the ship in a royal boat, accompanied by a stout woman of middle age, good-looking and of considerable charm. She was dressed only in a girdle of gold with a sash to hide her nakedness. Besides, she wore necklaces and bracelets twined like snakes. Her hair was kept together by a gold band also crested in front in the form of a gold-hooded cobra to indicate, as Bhikru explained, that she was a high officer of the queen's.

Krishna was not surprised to see this muscular Naga-kanya, snake-maiden. Bhikru had already told him about their strange ways. Here, women ruled over men with a rod of iron. The queen, being the Goddess Ma incarnate, was a divinity, possessed of the right of life and death over her subjects. The rulership descended from mother to daughter. With such doughty snake-maidens to see that her wishes were respected, it would be no wonder if the king lost his life, supposing that he disobeyed the queen.

'Krishna, this is a fearful land. The queen had divined your arrival days back,' Uddhava informed him.

'What?' asked Krishna surprised.

'Like our sages, she can read the future,' said Uddhava. 'Let us go. The Crown Princess has come to receive you. And mind you, she is the one that counts, not her husband, the Prince, and is to be addressed as the Divine Princess.'

Invited by the officer's gestures, Krishna and Uddhava stepped into the royal boat, rowed by four oarsmen. Two other boats, which followed, carried the presents which Krishna wanted to give to the queen.

The Divine Princess, a strikingly beautiful woman of about twenty-two, and a younger princess, slender and more beautiful, surrounded by some ladies of the court, received Krishna. They were all dressed like the officer who had come to invite Krishna. But the girdles and necklaces of the princesses were bejewelled and the symbol of the hooded cobra in their headbands was carved in magnificent rubies which flashed back the rays of the sun in blood-red refulgence.

On both sides of the Princesses stood women armed with lances. And behind the Divine Princess stood her husband, the Prince, tall and straight and sinewy. He was dressed like the Princess except for the divine symbol of the cobra; in addition, he had a short sword by his side suspended by a shoulder strap of gold. A little way behind, armed men kept the crowd back.

When Krishna saluted the Divine Princess in his graceful way, she signed to the Prince to step forward. He came as directed, saluted her humbly, and chastely and fluently translated the welcome of the Princess, to Krishna's surprise, into the language of the Gods which the Aryans spoke in Mathura.

Krishna replied to the welcome with befitting courtesy and said : 'Divine Princess, I, son of Vasudeva, the Lord of the Shooras, and the disciple of the Best of Gurus, Sandipani, salute you.'

As he laid emphasis on the word 'Sandipani,' he watched the face of the Prince closely. When the Prince heard Krishna mention 'Sandipani,' he grew pale and the shadow of fear crept into his eyes. He paused, hesitated, and then interpreted what Krishna had said, to the Princess. Krishna felt convinced that the Prince was no other than Punardatta, Guru Sandipani's son, as Bhikru had suspected.

The Divine Princess, with royal dignity, replied : 'I offer you, Vaasudeva, a hearty welcome to the City of the Sun on behalf of the Divine Mother.'

Her eyes were fixed on Krishna and so were also those of the young Princess, and the flashing smile on Krishna's lips evoked a similar response from both of them. But while the smile of the younger was heart-felt and glowing, the elder one's was haughty; she was already a divinity.

The Divine Princess then made a sign; the Prince, her husband, stepped back. Under her orders, the younger Princess stepped forward to lead Krishna to the litter which awaited them. The Divine Princess and the Prince stepped into their litter which led the way, carried on the shoulders of four strong men.

Sitting in the litter, the younger Princess, by smiles and gestures and in a tongue which Krishna did not understand, began to show that she wished to treat Krishna as a friend. Krishna had a feeling for beauty and could not help admiring the shapeliness of limbs, the firm little breasts, the dimpled cheeks and the winning smile of the snake-maiden; at the same time, he could not help being repelled by what he thought was a shameless way of trying to please an utter stranger. But he was new to the ways of Snakeland, and thought it rather soon to judge her by the standard of the Aryans.

They reached the palace of the Divine Mother, a large stone structure standing in the middle of the fort. Krishna was led to an apartment where his men from the Punyajana ship, aided by two officers, stood ready to serve him. The young Princess, with coquettish gestures, took leave of Krishna. Her assurances that she would see Krishna again soon were interpreted by the Punyajana boy who knew the language of Nagaloka well.

'Uddhava, we have found Punardatta after all,' Krishna said. 'But these Nagakanyas will not let him go. We may have to steal him away from here.'

'We are in a difficulty,' replied Uddhava. 'I have never even dreamt of such a strange world. But, I have an idea, and I will work out an escape.'

A little later, the Prince was ushered in by the stout Nagakanya officer who had come to meet Krishna on the ship. He had an uneasy look and, after exchanging salutations, stood nervously for some time not knowing how to begin the conversation.

'Punardatta, I am glad to find you,' said Krishna. The Prince looked frightened when his original name was uttered. Krishna continued: 'Gurudeva has sent you his blessing. He has not forgotten you, even for a moment.'

'I am sorry you have come here,' said the Prince. Cautioning Krishna by a glance at the woman who stood near the door watching them very carefully, he continued: 'Please do not forget that though that woman does not understand our language, she is watching every glance and gesture we exchange.'

'Are you a prisoner? I thought you were the consort of the Divine Princess—destined to be the King some day,' said Krishna.

'Yes, if I survive long enough to see the Divine Mother joining Ma. But I tell you frankly, I do not like your coming here. I sense it is going to spell calamity for us all,' said the Prince.

'Why ? I have only come to take you back to Gurudeva. He is very unhappy without you,' said Krishna.

'I wish he had given me up for dead,' replied the Prince. 'Up to now I was happy at the thought that he had done so. But I cannot return to him.' Then after a little thought he added helplessly, 'Even if I can, I will not return.'

'Why ? What has happened to you ?' asked Krishna with concern. 'Have you forgotten our sacred land ?'

'Vaasudeva, during the year that I have lived here, I have lost all desire to go back to the stern life led by my father. At first I was very unhappy here and wanted to return if I could. But then I became a slave to this life,' Punardatta continued a little abashed. 'I live in luxury here. I have considerable power. Above all, I have known the joys which Larika alone can give; I cannot go away from her. You, living among the women of our land who are so modest and self-restrained, can have no idea of the ecstatic delights which a Nagakanya, and a superb one at that, can give you,' the Prince said weakly.

Krishna was puzzled at the attitude of the Prince. 'What has happened to you, Punardatta ? Have you lost the noble impulse to lead a life of *tapas ?*' Krishna asked. 'Do you not care for the Dharma of our glorious ancestors ? Are you content with good food, good living and sensual delights which no Arya would ever make the aim of his life ?'

Krishna paused and looked at the Prince, his eyes filled with pity. Then he resumed in slow, affectionate tones : 'Punardatta, I am glad the Gods sent me in time here to rescue you from this *asuri* (demonic) life. Every moment you live in fear of losing your position, power, luxury, and if I guess correctly, your life itself. You are afraid to return to Gurudeva and to lead the life of our sages. Have you not fallen, my brother ?'

Punardatta again looked down, unable to answer Krishna's question. Then he said: 'It is true that I do not want to risk my life by attempting to leave Vaivasvatapuri. And I hate the idea of losing the comforts I enjoy here. In the beginning I did loathe this life which, for Sandipani's son, was so much like a dog's. But then I felt as a dog would: I had to learn it if I was to live. And now I want to live the way I am living. I have lost the urge to seek another life.'

'Has it never struck you, Punardatta, that to lead a life of fear and fraud, weltering in the delights of the senses as you have been, is to live as a pet animal?' Krishna asked sadly.

'Well, call it that. It is true I am sunk in mud. But it is my nature. And living the way I live has become a necessity,' said Punardatta.

'For the delights which a Nagakanya gives you, you leave your father,—your God,—to rot in utter loneliness, eating his heart out! Is this the way you offer your worship to your father—to your ancestors—to the Fathers of our people who saw and taught us Dharma? When regard for the father ends, man sinks into a beast,' added Krishna.

Punardatta bent his head, placed his hands on his eyes and shook his head. 'I cannot leave this land,' he said in a choking voice. 'But it is no use thinking of all these things. Even if I wanted to leave it, I cannot.'

'Why not?' asked Krishna. 'If you are a prisoner here, it is all the more reason why you should listen to me. I shall lead you to freedom.'

'Yes, in a way, I am a prisoner. In this land, a person chosen to be the consort of the Divine Princess must die as such or become the king. He cannot be disloyal to his spouse; he cannot leave her. If he so much as tries to do so, he has to die. Such are the ordinances of Ma,' said Sandipani's son sadly.

'How did you come to be chosen as the husband of the Divine Princess?' asked Krishna.

'This is a strange land, Vaasudeva. The Divine Mother has fearful powers to work miracles, just as the demons of our land had in the days when they fought our Gods. Whenever a possible bridegroom for one of her daughters comes to Vaivasvatapuri, she knows all about him days in advance. Perhaps, by her strange powers, she herself brings such men to these shores. I have no doubt that even you have been brought here by her,' said Punardatta.

'But I have come of my own free choice,' said Krishna.

'I am not so sure. But let me tell you what happened to me. When I was brought here by the Punyajana *rakshasas,* I was cordially received by the Divine Mother and the Festival of Choice was held,' said Punardatta.

'The Festival of Choice? What is that?' asked Krishna.

'It is the greatest and the most exciting festival in the City. When the festival was held, I had to fight the then hubsand of the Divine Princess. When I killed him, I was wedded to the Princess; in fact I had no choice. If I had been killed, the other man would have continued to be the Prince,' said Punardatta.

Krishna was lost in thought for a moment. 'Am I too to marry the young Princess?' he asked.

'It seems so, though the Divine Mother, when inspired by the Goddess Ma, the Mother of the World, had not yet spoken. But if she so commands, you will have to obey. If you refuse to obey, the ancient ordinances are clear — you will be killed by the king, that is all,' said Punardatta.

'And if I marry her?' asked Krishna. He now began to understand the meaning of the advances which the young Princess had made to him; she was getting ready to fulfil her mother's prophecy.

'You will have to wed her; you will have to live here till you die or are replaced when killed by another better suitor; for no daughter of Ma can leave the City of the

Sun. You will be well fed, well kept; you will wield some power; but you will always remain subservient to the Princess, your wife. You will be her slave, her parasite, her lover, all in one, and guarded by women watchers who will never leave you to yourself. And all the time you will live in dread of the Divine Mother prophesying your death,' said the Prince with bitterness.

'I will rather die than accept such slavery. Cannot you reject it too?' asked Krishna.

'I cannot,' said Punardatta, shaking his head in sorrow. 'When the Divine Mother, in her pre-vision, sees another more suitable young man coming here, the Festival of Choice will be held. I will then have to fight the stranger to the death, his or mine. Whoever survives will then be the consort of the Divine Princess. So I am awaiting my turn every day to kill, or be killed by, some stranger, lured here by the miraculous powers of the Divine Mother.'

'But where does the king come in? He seems to be nobody,' said Krishna.

'The consort of the Divine Princess, chosen in the way I have described, becomes the king only when her mother dies and she becomes the Divine Mother in her own right. He is then the Divine Father, the Lord of Death, Yama as we call him. He will then enjoy absolute sway over the lives of all, of course remaining subservient to the Divine Mother all the time.'

'But suppose we find a means of going away from here, will you come with us?' asked Krishna, putting an affectionate hand on Punardatta's shoulder.

'No. I do not want to leave this land. You are a fool, Krishna, even to think that you can leave it yourself,' said Punardatta.

'Well, I will discover a way to escape and take you with me,' said Krishna with determination.

'Uddhava, you were right. We are trapped in the land of Yama,' said Krishna, when Punardatta had left.

10

A NAGAKANYA BELONGS TO HER MOTHER

In the afternoon, the woman courtier-in-charge came to lead Krishna and Uddhava to the Sacred Presence. They laid aside their arms and followed her, the Punyajana brothers and others following with the presents which they had brought from the ship.

The corridors through which they passed were guarded by armed women; that was their privilege conferred on them by the Goddess Ma, the Mother of the World.

In a dark hall called the Hall of the Sacred Fire, which they ultimately entered, they could see the leading courtiers — mostly women — standing in two rows. At the other end of the room was a platform with a square pit in the middle in which the sacrificial fire had been lit. Its flames from time to time threw fitful gleams of light on those present, which made everything seem weird. Behind the sacrificial fire was a huge image, carved in stone, of Ma, the Mother of the World, big-bellied and heavy-breasted.

Krishna, followed by Uddhava, was led to the foot of the steps of the platform. On one side near the steps stood the two Princesses, and behind them, the Prince. The Divine Father, the only person who had the privilege of being fully armed in the Sacred Presence, stood on the platform; he was a well-built man of about fifty with a very good-natured, open, handsome face.

Gongs sounded. Before the sound faded away, the flame of the sacrificial fire shot up man-high, and when it subsided, there stood behind the sacrificial pit the Divine Mother. She was a strikingly beautiful woman in her middle age, bearing herself with majestic dignity. She

was encircled by a large girdle and necklaces, and wore a diadem with a hooded cobra, all aflame with large sapphires, brilliantly lit up by the flames from the fire. Besides, she had a living cobra round her neck.

Every one prostrated before her and rose only when commanded by the Divine Mother in a voice of penetrating richness. Then, at a sign from her, the Father asked the Prince to step up to him. Punardatta came forward and invited Krishna to give his message.

'Divine Mother, I, Krishna, son of Vasudeva, the Lord of the Shooras, bring you a message of friendliness from King Ugrasena, the Lord of the Earth. From that Best of Yadavas, I have brought presents, which, I hope, the Divine Mother will deign to accept,' said Krishna.

There was deep silence. Then the Mother spoke in her resonant voice: 'Son of Vasudeva, we welcome you. We knew some days before that you were coming to us. We had the command of Ma, the Mother of the World, to welcome you. We accept the presents that you have brought and assure you of our hospitality.'

She paused and Punardatta interpreted her words to Krishna.

Then the Mother raised her hand and there was once more a deep silence in the hall.

'We commend you, noble son of Vasudeva, to the care of our august Consort, the Divine Father. The command of Ma, the Mother of the World, is that you shall live with us for ever and ever as one of us,' said the Mother.

Krishna was going to say something when the message was interpreted to him, but the Divine Mother raised her hand to stop him and proceeded further: 'You shall be one of us. Ma, the Mother of the World, has so ordained and her will shall be obeyed.'

A man-high flame leapt out of the sacrificial fire and she vanished before Krishna could say a word.

The King stepped down from the platform, put a paternal hand on Krishna's shoulder, and led him through

a private corridor into a chamber behind the Hall of the Sacred Fire where, on a stone couch, lay the Mother, exhausted and perspiring, fanned by two women attendants. Once Goddess Ma departed from her body, the Mother was always left thus, drained of all vitality. The King knew the language of the Gods and with his aid the Queen asked Krishna many questions about himself, his family and the country from which he came.

The King, to Krishna's surprise, also asked him about Parashurama, the ancient warrior who had now retired to a mountain hermitage near Shurparaka, and about some warriors who were the pupils of that great Master of War. Evidently he knew all about them.

Krishna and Uddhava were once again entrusted to the care of the courtier-in-charge, who took them round the town and the harbour. When they returned to their apartment, they sent a message to Bhikru by one of the Punyajana boys and Raddu on the pretext of sending for some more presents from the ship.

At night, Krishna awoke from his slumber to see a shadow sitting by his bed and speaking softly. He sat up and sought his sword. Then he smiled; the young Princess had come to woo him. She sat beside him, her long hair almost sweeping his face, and softly patted his hand. Krishna could feel her slender, graceful body close to him and, though feeling a strange sensation of excitement, could not help understanding that it was all wrong.

In a few moments, however, a woman stepped up noiselessly to the Princess and whispered something in her ear. She got up and shot out of the room like a frightened deer.

Uddhava woke and asked, 'Krishna, what is it?'

'It is nothing. The Nagakanya is trying to twist her tail round me,' said Krishna, laughing.

There was a short silence; then slow but heavy footsteps came up to him. Krishna wished he had his *chakra* with him.

'You are called by the Divine Father,' came a man's voice.

'Shall I come with you, Krishna?' Uddhava asked.

'No. You are not called,' replied Krishna. 'Don't worry about me.'

Led by the attendant, Krishna went to a distant part of the palace, where, in the star-light, Krishna was able to recognise the stalwart form of the King.

'Don't be afraid, my son. I have not called you to hurt you,' said the King.

'I salute you, Divine Father. Why have you taken the trouble to call me at the dead of night?' asked Krishna as he sat in front of the King.

'Vaasudeva, you are divinely gifted, as the Divine Mother has seen in her vision. I have come to admire you —I should say, love you, as my own son after our talk today. I have, therefore, called you secretly — you don't know at what a risk — to speak to you frankly. It is very dangerous for you to stay in Nagaloka. Flee away to your ship and sail before daybreak. I shall help to arrange your flight,' said the King in a low whisper.

'Divine Father, from the way you speak, you are an Arya. You are the King here. Why should I flee from here when I am under your protection?' Krishna asked.

'If you stay here, you will have to marry Asika, my younger daughter, and be bound to us for life. You will never be free, never your own master; you will have to live in constant dread of Ma's displeasure. And if some stranger comes along, you run the risk of being killed and his taking your place,' said the King in deadly earnest.

'But you have been a King for long and nothing has happened to you?' Krishna said.

'My son, how can I describe to you the dangers that surround you here?' the King said wistfully. 'Years ago —I have lost count of the years — I came to Vaivasvatapuri because the ship in which I was travelling sank near these shores.'

The King paused and then continued: 'I was then given a hearty welcome by the former Divine Mother, exactly as you have been given. I had to take part in the Festival of Choice and fight the Prince, the husband of the then Divine Princess who is now the Mother. Luckily I was a disciple of the great Bhargava, Rama of the Battle Axe, so I was easily able to kill the Prince. Then I had to wed the Princess and stay here.'

'But you could have left when the next ship from Shurparaka came,' said Krishna.

'The Nagakanya takes a husband because she must, but she never gives herself to the husband. I belong to her, but she belongs to her mother always. I was a prince and at the same time prisoner — a mere slave, subservient to the will of the Mother and her daughter. Oh! How I hate myself sometimes for being so! But these are Nagakanyas. Once they twine themselves round you, there is no escape,' said the King with a sigh.

'But all these years, you have remained all-powerful — of course subject to the will of Ma,' observed Krishna.

'You have no idea how I have suffered all these years. First, there was the dread of some stranger coming to displace me; four times strangers drifted to these shores,' said the King.

Krishna could see that the King shuddered at the memory of those anxious years. 'What happened to those strangers, Father?' he asked.

'They came, as you did, one after the other. The arrival of each was foreseen by the Divine Mother. Each time a Festival of Choice was held. Luckily the training I had in the hard school of the Master stood me in good stead and I killed every one of them, poor innocent men. Every time I think of them, I shudder at the brutality with which, in order to live, I killed those handsome young men who scarcely knew how to wield a sword or to fight with their hands.' The King paused, heaved a sigh and continued: 'Then the Divine Mother died. The Princess, my wife, succeeded to the office. And now I am the Divine

Father, the God of Death, who, at the Mother's instance, have to kill whomsoever she wishes.'

'But you are all-powerful now. Why don't you change these horrible customs? And I see that the Divine Mother holds you in deep affection. You can persuade her to do what you want,' said Krishna.

The King laughed bitterly. 'Can I?' he asked. 'My son, I dare not fall ill. I dare not rest. I dare not deviate from the commands of the Divine Mother. After any lapse, however trivial, my life would be forfeited.'

'Why don't you come with me and Punardatta? We can still go to the ship, the three of us, and save ourselves.'

'Vaasudeva, you are a brave young man. But we can't leave this world of the Nagakanyas,' the King said.

'But why?' asked Krishna.

'Punardatta will not come, nor I,' repeated the King. 'The Nagakanyas are irresistible; they wind round and round you till you become their parasites. In return, they give you joys — joys which, once you taste them, you can never do without.'

'Then you don't hate the Queen for the sufferings she has caused you?' asked Krishna in surprise. For the second time in one day, he had heard of the joys the Nagakanyas provide, which enmesh a spirited being in helpless subservience.

'Sufferings from the Mother!' exclaimed the King. 'When the Queen is not possessed by Ma, she is a wonderful woman — a woman for whom any man would be ready to die,' said the King in a voice which showed he was more and more moved. 'She never forgives a lapse, it is true, but she never stints her love or her attentions, or the joys which come of ecstatic surrender. No, Vaasudeva, I cannot leave her. I love her. My life is bound up with her. When she dies, I will die with her. These are Ma's ordinances. But apart from them, life would have no charm left for me without her.'

'Divine Father, you are wise and experienced. I am but a boy. But with a Nagakanya as your wife, what

happens to your desire to rise higher, to your obligations to your ancestors and to the ways of our ancient sages?' asked Krishna.

'You have only to smother them in the joys which the Nagakanyas give you,' said the King.

'But Vasishtha and Arundhati, Agastya and Lopamudra, those great sages of our race, gave each other and received each other. They shared their lives; they were one in learning and *tapas;* they were one in heroic deeds. They were together in everything. What about them?' asked Krishna.

'A Nagakanya demands all; she never gives all. And for the exquisite bodily joys she gives you, she buys you, your hopes and your obligations to your ancestors and to your ancient ways,' said the King.

'August King, I am beholden to you for your advice. But I have come here on a mission. I have promised my Guru to bring back his son, Punardatta, now your Prince, and I won't go back without him,' said Krishna firmly.

'Then you also are doomed,' said the King.

'Father, you are so noble-hearted. Why don't you help me to take away Punardatta?' asked Krishna.

'I can't,' replied the King.

'I would prefer to die rather than desist from my duty,' Krishna said. Then he added, 'But I know, Father, that you will help.'

And the King was lost in admiration of the young man who talked with God-given authority, just as he had heard his Master, Rama of the Battle Axe, do. The Gods of his native land had given this authority to the sages he had almost forgotten.

11

'ASIKA, COME BACK'

Krishna and Uddhava spent the early part of the next day seeing the sights of Vaivasvatapuri. Raddu also came from the ship bringing presents, which Krishna gave to the King, the Crown Princess and the Prince. Asika, the younger Princess, who had by now practically appropriated Krishna to herself, was wild with joy when she received the presents from him.

In the afternoon, Krishna was discussing with Uddhava their plans for making an escape, when Asika, the young Princess, wild with grief, burst in upon him. With her hair flying like so many snakes, she clung to him, crying hysterically. Krishna, who could not understand what she was saying, had to call in one of the Punyajana boys to interpret why she was sobbing.

'Vaasudeva, she says that the Divine Mother has issued fresh commands. You are to fight the Prince for the hand of Larika, the Crown Princess, in the Festival of Choice.'

Krishna was shocked; he could scarcely believe that he had been chosen by Ma to kill Punardatta and wed the elder Princess. Now he could understand the grief of Asika, for she had taken it for granted that he was to wed her.

It was an unexpected blow to all the plans they were making for kidnapping Punardatta. But before Krishna could perceive any light to help him to deal with the murky situation that had developed, he was himself summoned into the presence of the Divine Mother. She was now lying prostrate on account of the strain to which her mind and body had been put when Ma had entered her. The King,

as before, sat by her side, looking at her with affectionate concern.

After salutations, the King, in a very gentle tone, spoke to Krishna : 'Vaasudeva, Ma, the Mother of the World, has spoken. You have been chosen to take part in the Festival of Choice and fight the Prince to the finish. If you survive, you shall have the honour of wedding the Crown Princess and, maybe, when we depart for the Land of Ma, you will become the Divine Father.'

'These are the commands of the Mother of the World,' corroborated the Mother wearily.

'But, I don't want to fight the Prince,' said Krishna.

'Then, it will be I who will have to kill you,' said the Father. 'That is what the unalterable ordinances of Ma have prescribed.'

'The ordinances of Ma are very strange,' Krishna commented. The Mother appeared to be shocked at hearing those words bordering on sacrilege. 'Why should I kill the Prince who has done me no harm ?' he asked.

'Orders have already been issued to hold the Festival of Choice the day after tomorrow,' said the King decidedly, leaving no scope for discussion.

Krishna, after due salutation, left, trying to fathom the significance of this new development.

He then sought an audience with the Prince, who, however, was surprisingly resigned about the matter.

'Krishna, Vaasudeva, did I not tell you that there is no escape from Nagaloka ? I must fight you now,' said Punardatta sadly. 'Ma's edicts are inexorable; no one may defy the Nagakanyas.'

'What do you propose to do ? asked Krishna.

'Uddhava has told me how you killed both Kamsa and Chanura, the invincible athlete. You have been trained in arms under my father, Guru Sandipani, than whom there is no greater teacher of warfare. You are sure to kill me,' said the Prince as if he was tired of waiting for death.

Krishna thought for a while and said : 'It is a difficult situation. We are spiritual brothers — you are the son of my Guru. But as things are, either you must kill me, or I must kill you. It is fratricide either way — *adharma.*' Krishna placed a hand on the Prince's shoulder with tender affection.

Suddenly the eyes of the Prince were filled with tears as he laid his head on Krishna's shoulder.

'Vaasudeva, I can't fight you. I don't want to. To make my father happy, you risked death to come here and take me away. So how can I kill you?' said the Prince as he wept.

'Nor am I going to kill you, Punardatta. Don't give up hope, my brother. We will still find a way out. The God of gods does not forsake those who stand firm in Dharma,' said Krishna.

'Krishna, my brother, you are full of hope, only because you don't know the Nagakanyas. I do. You cannot escape their stifling power, in life or death,' replied the Prince sorrowfully.

Deep in thought, Krishna returned to his apartment and discussed with Uddhava the terrible plight in which they were placed.

A little later, the King again summoned Krishna into his presence. He was now by himself and his old fatherly sympathetic self.

'Vaasudeva, I am very sorry that the commands of Ma have destroyed all your plans. When you came here I had looked forward to your marrying Asika. She is a good, affectionate girl, different from her sister and mother — more like our girls. I love her very much. But now Ma has willed otherwise. Asika is disconsolate. Her heart is broken. I cannot even bear to hear the piteous words in which she pours out her misery to me. I can understand her distress; I am very unhappy myself at the prospect. If you survive the Festival, you will wed the Crown Princess. Now she will have to wait for another stranger to come, and she loves you madly,' said the King.

'I fully realise the situation. But what is the way out? You alone can help us,' said Krishna.

'How can I help in face of Ma's commands?' asked the King.

'What if Punardatta and I both refuse to fight each other?' asked Krishna.

'Then I will have to kill you both with my own hands,' said the King. 'I am the God of Death,' he added with bitterness.

'Then both your daughters will have to wait for other husbands,' said Krishna.

'I wish I knew what my master, Parashurama, would have done in a situation like this,' the King murmured sighing.

'He would have taken back Punardatta to his father, to follow Dharma,' Krishna said.

The King was silent for a moment. Then as if a thought had struck him, he added: 'It is the will of Ma, and we must obey. But I don't want Asika to die of grief, or attempt suicide. Please go to her and assure her that Ma, in her wisdom, will send her a proper husband at the appropriate time.'

'How can I give her an assurance? It will make her all the more miserable,' said Krishna.

'Vaasudeva, I wish I could save you, even at the cost of my life,' murmured the King, as he looked at this young boy who was willing to face death to save his Dharma.

'Do exactly as the great Master of Dharma, Parashurama, would expect you to do,' said Krishna.

'Please, Vaasudeva, do me this favour. I don't want the girl to commit suicide before I can smooth things out for her. I will send my trusted man with you. He will interpret whatever you say to her, without anyone being the wiser,' said the King.

Krishna was taken by the King's trusted man to Princess Asika, who no sooner saw him than she clung to him, sobbing piteously.

'Don't leave me, Vaasudeva. I will die if you leave me. Everybody is my enemy. Even the Divine Mother. Larika is Ma's favourite. No, no, I won't let you leave me,' said the Princess.

Krishna hated this Nagakanya clinging to him with unrestrained abandon, but he understood her feelings. He patted her, smoothed her hair and, through the interpreter, talked to her.

'Princess, don't give way to grief. I am only a stranger. It is Ma's will that you will have to wait for another and a better husband,' said Krishna.

'No, no, I want you — you — and no one else,' she sobbed. 'There is no one in the world like you.'

'But I am going to be killed tomorrow; so there is an end of me. And why worry?' said Krishna.

'No, no,' Asika sobbed. 'I won't let you be killed. If you are killed, I will kill myself.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Asika. No Nagakanya ever dies after her husband. She soon takes another. Those are the ordinances of the Mother of the World,' Krishna said a little sarcastically.

'No, I am going to die the moment you die,' Asika said, shaking her head decisively.

Krishna smiled indulgently. 'You people are strange. You will die for me after I am killed, but will not come with me to my land while I am alive.'

'No Nagakanya leaves her home. Those are Ma's commands. How can I?' Asika asked helplessly.

Krishna laughed outright. 'Therefore, I must die, so that you may die for me. But you won't try to live and follow me wherever I go.'

Asika was dumbfounded. It was an alternative which, as a Nagakanya, she could never have conceived. Then she looked up and her tears dried.

'Will you take me with you to your land?' she asked.

Krishna saw a gleam in the darkness which enveloped the situation. The Divine Father was right. Asika was different.

'Provided I get away myself,' he replied.

'Oh, oh, oh,' she sobbed. 'I don't want to live without you.'

'If I don't fight the Prince, the Divine Father will kill me; then you will kill yourself. So there will be no going away for us,' Krishna said with a teasing smile. 'We will be together in the land of Ma. But you won't come with me, will you ?' asked Krishna.

'Oh yes, I will. I will — wherever you take me. I hate this place,' she said. 'I hate everybody here — except you.'

Krishna saw that Asika smiled, though her eyes were full of tears.

Next day, in the afternoon, the residents of Vaivasvatapuri, men, women and children, assembled upon the sloping bank of the river on both sides of the stone-steps leading to the jetty and on the open space between the steps and the jetty. Armed women stood to the right and left of each step.

The open space was surrounded by men guards who squatted on the ground to fence it off as an arena for the fatal combat. Beyond the arena stood Bhikru and other members of the crew, who had come from the Punyajana ship in boats to witness the festival. Uddhava stood in front near the arena, with Hullu and Hukku just behind him.

At the appropriate time, the Divine Mother came out of the gate of the fort, glistening in sapphires, accompanied by the Father, the Princesses and the courtiers, and was received by the people with shouts of joy. The Festival of Choice was the greatest festival of the people of the City of the Sun; it was fine sport; it was bloody and therefore exciting; it decided the fate of the sacred royal house, also settling the domestic problem of the Crown Princess, the Divine Mother of the future.

Wooden fifes blared; drums sounded. There was a hushed silence in the crowd when Punardatta and Krishna stepped forward before the Divine Mother and prostrated themselves. She blessed them both and so did the King

after her. Hailed by the crowd's exultant shouts, the two combatants came down the steps to the arena.

As they were stepping down, the Prince whispered : 'Vaasudeva, forgive me if I happen to kill you.'

'Brother, neither of us is going to be killed. Fight your best. Forget that I am your father's spiritual son,' Krishna replied.

'Father will be pining away in Avanti,' murmured the Prince.

'Don't think of him. I have given him a promise to bring you back and I am going to keep my promise,' replied Krishna with an enigmatic smile.

Both entered the arena and took the short swords which the attendants held out for them. The Divine Mother gave the signal. Drums sounded. The weapons clashed and sparks flew. Punardatta was surprised to find Krishna on the defensive and slowed down his attack lest he might be killed.

'Fight on. Don't be a fool,' Krishna whispered to the Prince, and attacked him with seeming fury. The attack drew the Prince into an offensive. He had seen through the game. Though Krishna was immeasurably superior to him, he was exerting himself just as much as would put him, Punardatta, on his mettle; whenever he dealt what he thought was a powerful blow, Krishna would parry it with easy grace.

Soon the attack and the counter-attack were matched; the fight became exciting. People grew enthusiastic. But neither of them gained any advantage over the other. The Mother and the Crown Princess looked on puzzled. Asika's heart was in her eyes, which were fastened on Krishna to see whether he was losing, for she had made up her mind : she was not going to survive Krishna.

The sword-play went on merrily, for both combatants appeared equally matched in performance. However, when the audience was growing tired of the stalemate, Krishna, by an adroit stroke, sent Punardatta's sword flying into the air, at the same time letting his own sword slip out of his hand as if by the impact of their swords.

The spectators became impatient. The people of Vaivasvatapuri had never seen such a well-matched but tiresome combat, going on and on, but drawing no blood. In a moment, however, the two combatants closed with each other, body locked to body. Krishna found that Punardatta's skill was limited and had to exert his utmost to limit his strength and skill to match those of the Prince.

Punardatta understood what Krishna wanted. He was staging a shadow fight, so that neither of them could be killed by the other. He could not discover what the motive was, nor what the end would be. But he had entered into the spirit of the mock combat and was quite content to play the part which his adroit antagonist had assigned to him.

They fought with hands and feet; they rolled, one on the other; they threw each other on to the ground, but only to rise again.

The crowd, excited at first, was soon disgusted at what was becoming a tame affair. They were impatient to feel the thrill which comes at the climax when the victor kills the vanquished. The crowd felt that it was going to be cheated out of this. Murmurs of angry protest rose from the people.

The sun was setting, when the King rose from his seat, evidently determined to discharge his duty.

'Neither of them can kill the other. The ordinance of Ma is clear.' His voice rang out clear.

The Divine Mother had risen, grim as death. The crowd grew silent and expectant. The King too, looked stern and concerned. Now the combatants, having failed to work out a choice, both had to be killed. When the King began to step down to the arena, the crowd felt that the great moment had come and broke out into wild shouts, which showed how blood-thirsty it was.

The King entered the arena and strode towards the combatants, who now stood locked in each other's arms, resisting with apparently an equally balanced strength, unable to move forward or backward.

As the King approached the combatants with sword uplifted, a slender figure with a bejewelled girdle and flying hair, ran down the steps giving a wild shriek which pierced all hearts, and flung herself on the combatants and stood between them and her father.

The crowd, for a moment, was stunned. They saw Princess Asika flying down the steps — protecting the two combatants with her body — and a roar, as of a hungry lion, issued from a hundred throats. The people were deprived of their expected thrill, by the sacrilegious conduct of the young Princess!

The King had barely approached the combatants when Krishna sent Punardatta sprawling on to the ground, caught hold of the sword held out by Uddhava, shook himself free from the shrieking Asika and pushed her into Uddhava's arms. Then he turned on the King.

'Uddhava, take them away,' Krishna shouted to Uddhava as he faced the King.

He immediately engaged the King, retreating step by step with his back towards the jetty on which the crew of the Punyajana ship were standing.

The people first looked on with awe. Then they howled in anger. Arms raised against the sacred person of the King! It was sacrilege. They shouted death to the stranger.

Armed guards stood near the King, ready to help him, but he waved them aside. 'Stand aside. I alone can offer the sacrifice to Ma,' he shouted angrily.

Krishna now had retreated right up to the jetty, the King pressing him hard. Suddenly the jetty was cut loose from its moorings. Hullu and Hukku lifted Punardatta and Asika, and jumped into the waiting boats.

Krishna then turned to the King, stepped back a little and threw his sword away. 'Disciple of the Venerable Bhargava, if you think that it is your Dharma to kill me, here I am,' he said, eyeing the God of Death defiantly. 'But I know you can't,' he added slowly, as his eyes, flaming with power, hypnotized the King.

The King, arrested in mid career, stood as if transfixed. The sword fell from his nerveless hand. Then he tottered as if he was fainting.

Krishna stepped back, jumped into the boat which Bhikru, oar in hand, had kept ready.

The crowd grew mad and roared with anger. The King stood near the water, as if dazed.

The jetty was floating away into the water. The Punyajana boats were being rowed fast, away to the ship.

Some guards flung themselves into the water to reach the boat in which Krishna stood sword in hand. But one guard after another, as he swam to the boat, met his fate.

The drums sounded a weird note as a flame leapt up on the top step where the Divine Mother was standing. The crowd turned to her in awed silence. Ma, the Mother of the World, had entered the body of the Queen. She came down the steps slowly, majestically, the women guards ranged on either side bowing low before the Sacred Presence.

The Mother stepped into the arena and slowly walked up to the place where the King stood as if dazed. She gave the orders. The women guards bore the King to the Palace.

Then the Divine Mother stood gazing at the sea, her eyes fixed on the Punyajana ship. The crowds looked at her rigid and concentrated face in silent awe.

Krishna and his friends were now on the ship, looking at what was happening on the shore. The anchor was lifted. Asika clung to him benumbed with fright.

With wide open eyes, those standing on the deck of the ship looked at the receding shore. They saw the Divine Mother standing on the brink of the sea — alone — looking at them. Then she spoke: 'Asika, come back, I command you. Come back.'

As the voice was wafted to the ship, Asika stood rigid, upright, gazing at the distant figure of her mother, who, like the very embodiment of power, appeared to command the waters.

'Come,' came her voice strangely conveyed across the water, 'Asika, come.'

Asika, as if in a trance, shook herself free, took a step, flung herself into the waters, and was seen swimming back to the Divine Mother.

'I knew that a Nagakanya is always her mother's, never her husband's,' said Krishna, with a smile, to Punardatta who stood in frightened silence.

12

THE FLIGHT

The Emperor Jarasandha flew into an ungovernable rage.

His son-in-law, Kamsa, his able lieutenant, had been murdered by his nephew. His two daughters, Asti and Prapti, had become widows in their teens. A cadet of his family, Vritrighna, had been cut to pieces. The power that he had built around his ambitious son-in-law had been demolished. And that too, by two boys!

It was a blow to him personally and also to his power and prestige. His allies and feudatories, who were present in Mathura at the time, had come away humiliated and insulted. They sent him reports of what had happened. Besides, Rukmi, the Prince of Vidarbha, came to Girivraja himself to narrate the events in lurid detail.

When his daughters, the widows of Kamsa, after the usual period of a year's mourning, returned to the parental home, they wailed and wailed, and cursed the father who could not protect their husband, the brave and loyal ruler of Mathura. Then the Emperor swore an oath: 'I swear by the Lord of Gods that I shall never rest till I send the sons of Vasudeva to the Land of Yama, the God of Death.'

And he summoned his staunch allies — Damaghosha of Chedi, Rukmi, the Prince of Vidarbha, Vinda and Anuvinda, the Princes of Avanti, Varada, the chief of Trigarta, King Shalva and others — to join him in his march on Mathura. The two sons of Vasudeva must pay the price of their heinous crime.

Messengers ran to and fro and, when the preparations were complete and the rainy season was over, the emperor of Magadha marched on Mathura.

When Jarasandha was a few days' march away from Mathura, the news came to the Yadava chiefs that the mighty conqueror was approaching the town to demand the heads of Krishna and Balarama.

Balarama had returned home from Sandipani's *ashram* earlier. Later Krishna returned too, after restoring Punardatta to the Guru.

The news of Krishna's return, after vanquishing the lord of Vaivasvatapuri in Patala and rescuing Sandipani's son under miraculous circumstances, electrified Mathura. And when he arrived, the whole town, led by King Ugrasena, came out to receive him. Jubilations were held and, by a unanimous verdict of the Yadavas, the eighteen-year-old son of Vasudeva, the saviour, was invited to lead them.

But Mathura, which had flourished so far under Kamsa's leadership of a few kings and under the strength of the Magadhan force, was in a sorry plight. King Ugrasena was old and weak, Akrura too saintly, Vasudeva too good. Old Bahuka Andhaka was dead and so was Pradyota. The Yadavas, who had returned to their native town, were disorganised and full of complaints.

Krishna at first declined the honour he was offered and suggested Balarama as the leader. But the Yadavas were not happy at the idea and the giant knew the worth of his brother and his own easy-going temperament better. He would not accept the leadership.

When Mathura learnt of the approach of the confederate forces of Jarasandha, panic was universal. King Ugrasena immediately called a council of war of the principal Yadava chiefs. Among the elders of them were Vasudeva and his brothers, Akrura and Vikadru, the guardian of the fort. Gada and Shanku led the younger chiefs. Krishna was there, seated at the right hand of the King. With him were Balarama and Uddhava. On his left was old Gargacharya, the sage.

They carefully heard the spies, who described the strength of the approaching army, its readiness to lay a long siege, the loyalty of the feudatories who had joined

hands with Jarasandha and the oath which he had sworn to take revenge on Vaasudeva and Balarama.

The Yadava chiefs, after they heard the report, were silent for a while. Then Ugrasena spoke: 'How long can we sustain the siege, Vikadru?'

For a moment Vikadru looked down, as if collecting his thoughts, and then with folded hands replied: 'Lord, excuse me if I tell you the blunt truth. But in times of danger, self-delusion is sure destruction.' He paused and then continued: 'Prince Kamsa, now in heaven, was sure of the strength which his alliance with Jarasandha gave him, and left Mathura practically unguarded. Our fort has not yet been fully repaired. The moat has been in neglect for years. We have not a sufficient stock of arms, or of food-stuffs to stand a siege.'

'Oh, God of Gods!' exclaimed King Ugrasena.

'Besides, most of the Yadavas, who left the city due to fear of the Prince, have now returned. In spite of our best efforts, they continue to be restive; they think that, whatever happens to others, they must be looked after first. And if we persist in defying Jarasandha, I shall not be surprised if the people in the city resent our action. Ordinary mortals are not cast in a heroic mould. They want to be protected; they think it is their due; they have little regard for those who protect them, if they have to bear hardships.'

When Akrura told them in detail what was happening in Hastinapura, all were lost in thought.

Then Akrura continued in a serious tone: 'Our friends, you know, have practically deserted us. King Damaghosha of Chedi, the lord of the Bhojas, is inscrutable. He helps us with arms in secret, but joins the march of Jarasandha. As you know, I returned from Hastinapura practically with empty hands. The Venerable Bhishma was very sympathetic, but was not ready to pledge support. King Dhritarashtra was elusive; his son Duryodhana thinks we are allied to the sons of Pandu and, though he did not say so in words, was hostile. If Mathura becomes powerful, he is afraid, his cousins will grow powerful too.'

'It is clear that we can't stand out for long,' said Ugrasena.

'I am afraid, we can't stand a siege for more than a few days,' said Vikadru.

'Krishna has begun to train our young men to real warfare only recently, and their morale is poor,' said Vasudeva.

Krishna folded his hands and with due humility interrupted his father: 'Lord, I move among the people and know all about them. War is fought not with arms, but with hearts. And few men in Mathura have the heart to die in defence of their homes.'

King Ugrasena sighed.

'When uncle Kamsa was alive, the Yadavas were strong because of their hatred, not because they had a resolute will to defend themselves against oppression,' said Krishna.

'It is only too true.'

'They will develop a resolute will, but it will take time. I fully understand what the noble Vikadru has said: we are not ready to defy Jarasandha and save Mathura,' said Krishna.

'That is true,' said Ugrasena. 'Unfortunately all the kings who surround Mathura are not disposed to help us. Vaasudeva, you are our saviour, the leader of our forces. Do what you think best.'

'Krishna, we have implicit confidence in you, your foresight and your wisdom. Suggest to us the best course possible,' said Vasudeva.

'Father, I have no doubt about the course to adopt. We are too weak to resist the enemy at present. Jarasandha only wants two of us. But for us, he will not invade Mathura. The best thing, therefore, will be for us to leave the town for some distant spot. On learning that we have fled, Jarasandha will not waste his time in besieging Mathura, but try to follow us,' said Krishna.

'But where will you go? His domains are vast and his allies are to be found as far away as the Sahya Mountains,' said Akrura.

'Do not worry about us. Nothing is ever going to happen to us. Jarasandha has succeeded in becoming mighty, but might, unaided by Dharma, dies. And I see before me the end of Jarasandha. But that moment has not come,' said Krishna.

'But Jarasandha will be here in a few days,' said Akrura.

'We will start immediately. Noble Vikadru, who has travelled to the ends of the earth, will tell us where we should go,' said Krishna.

'Vaasudeva, you are noble and wise. What you have suggested is the best course.'

'But where will they be safe?' asked Vasudeva. 'Damaghosha, the King of Chedi, though husband of my sisters, is Jarasandha's friend. Bhishmaka of Vidarbha, and particularly his son Rukmi, are Jarasandha's dependants.'

'Far beyond their domains lie the Sahya Mountains which touch the high heavens,' replied Vikadru, explaining the position wordily as old men do. 'Beyond them there is Karavirapura on the banks of the Venya. It was founded in ancient days by Padmavarma, the step-brother of our ancestor Madhava. His descendant, King Shrigalava, is our relative and will welcome you.'

'How is Shrigalava related to us?' asked Balarama, who, in his characteristic way, was listening to the whole conversation carelessly.

'Balarama, it is time you knew about Shrigalava. Vaasudeva, it will show you how widely spread we Yadavas are.'

'Yes, I think you should tell them of the Yadavas in the other lands to which they are going,' said Vasudeva.

'I had a mind to tell both your sons about them some day. But now that they are going, we don't know for how long, they should be told. Krishna, you are our leader; the hope not only of the Yadavas but of all the Aryans is centred in you. What I tell you now may be helpful to you in your life.'

'Uncle Vikadru, I should like to hear all you know about the Yadavas in other lands,' said Krishna courteously.

'Then listen,' said Vikadru. 'King Haryashva of the family of the Emperor Yayati wedded Madhumati, the daughter of the demon Madhu, and received Anarta and Surashtra as a gift. He then founded Girinagar. By five princesses, the daughters of the Naga king Dhumravarna, he begot five sons. They were Muchukunda, who founded Mahishmati and Purika in the Vindhyas; Padmavarma, who founded Karavirapura on the Venya; Sarasa, who founded Kraunchapuri; Harita, who inherited from his maternal grandfather the island in the sea known for its pearl fisheries; and Madhava, your ancestor. Madhava begot Satvata, who begot Bhima.'

After a pause Vikadru continued. 'In his time, the Madhuvana region, then ruled by the sons of the demon Madhu, was destroyed by Shatrughna, the younger brother of Ramachandra, the son of Dasharatha, the ruler of Ayodhya, who founded Mathura. Later, my lord, the valiant Bhima regained Mathura from the descendants of Shatrughna. Thus Mathura became the home of the Yadavas.'

'Then your Majesty's noble ancestor Bhima begot Andhaka; Andhaka begot Revata, who ruled over Girinagar in Surashtra which thereupon came to be called Raivataka. Revata begot Riksha of noble fame, who begot Vishwagarbha. He, as you know, was the father of Shoora and Babhru, from whom you Vasudeva and Akrura are descended,' continued Vikadru. 'Vaasudeva, don't forget that you are most powerfully connected. You have clansmen in Anarta and Surashtra; in the Vindhyas and the Sahya Mountains. Sons of your father's sister Pritha are claimants to the empire of the Bharatas. His other sister, Shrutashrava, you know, is the queen of Chedi. The Kings of Vidarbha are Bhojas, just as the Yadavas are. Remember, Krishna, you are the centre of a vast. . . .'[1]

'What will happen to you both, my sons, if Jarasandha decides to pursue you, or Shrigalava betrays you?' asked Vasudeva anxiously.

'Father, do not worry about us. He whom Dharma protects is always safe,' said Krishna.

'And Dharma is there in the form of the immortal Bhargava, the son of the venerable Jamadagni,' said Gargacharya. 'Though he lives in Shurparaka,[2] which he reclaimed from the sea, he often visits the kingdoms of the Sahya Mountains. I will go to him myself and beg him to look after you.'

'How can the venerable Bhargava be of any help? He has vowed not to use arms,' said Balarama.

'Yet his ancient wisdom is mightier than the terrible *parashu* with which he once destroyed kings.'

'Let us not spend time in talk,' said Krishna decisively. 'Long before the dawn breaks, we will be on our way. Venerable King, after we have gone a day and a night, please send Gada to Jarasandha with a message that if he wants Balarama and Krishna he won't find them in Mathura; he should seek them somewhere else. They have fled away. His vanity will then drive him to follow us and leave Mathura unharmed.'

13

ON THE WAY

Krishna went to take leave of his Mother Devaki. Her voice was choked with tears as she raised him from the ground where, in loving salutation, he had prostrated himself.

'My son, am I never going to have you to myself? To be free from anxiety about you?' asked Devaki piteously.

'Mother, everything that happens to me has a purpose. But for Jarasandha's desire to kill me, I would never go on such a wonderful journey. And from what uncle Vikadru said today I know what a task awaits me,' said Krishna.

'It is you who are wonderful, Govinda. Nothing seems to trouble you,' said Devaki.

'Why should anything trouble me? Things only happen to me because I go to meet them half-way; I don't wait for them. And don't forget that we are going to be looked after by the great Bhargava, at whose command even the sea yielded up land,' Krishna said with a smile.

'Won't you take anyone else with you?' asked Devaki.

'No. If there are only two of us, we won't be noticed. Uddhava, however, is coming with us as far as Kundinapura. Then he will go before us to announce our arrival to the King of Karavirapura,' said Krishna.

'My son, return to me as early as you can,' Devaki said wiping her tears. 'And don't lose heart.'

'Dear mother, rest assured that, whatever happens, I will try to be worthy of you. You think me a god, but if I am one, it is only because I am born of a goddess.' His smile was heartening. 'I will never forget it. It is my greatest strength,' he added.

After Krishna had taken leave, he found Trivakra, who had now attached herself to Devaki, talking confidentially to Uddhava. She fell at his feet and made an offering of flowers to him.

'Lord, remember me sometimes,' Trivakra said with tears in her eyes.

'Wherever I scent flowers, I will find you, Trivakra. I will never forget you, for you always think of me,' he said, stroked her hands and left.

Before dawn broke, Krishna, Balarama and Uddhava rode out on the best horses that Mathura could provide and speeded on their way.

Princess Rukmini bit her lips in anger. Her brother Rukmi had been summoned by Jarasandha to join him in his march on Mathura to demand the heads of Krishna and Balarama, Devaki's sons.

She was now a young woman of flaming beauty and scintillating intelligence, every inch a queen. She had also a will of her own. She loved her grandfather Kaishika, had little respect for her good-natured father Bhishmaka, and hated her brother Rukmi, who, in fact, ruled the kingdom. And, whenever she could, she made herself felt in the affairs of the royal family.

Rukmi had learnt the art of war in the hard school of Parashurama and was a formidable warrior. He was both headstrong and ambitious and, taking advantage of his father's weak nature, had joined Kamsa and accepted the hegemony of Jarasandha.

Kamsa's death, which, at the beginning, appeared to him to be a set-back to his fortunes, turned out a blessing in disguise, for it gave greater scope to his ambition. He went to Girivraja and placed himself at the disposal of the Emperor, who promptly accepted him as an important lieutenant. Thus he was given a chance of not only helping the Emperor, but taking his revenge on Krishna, for, he had never forgotten nor forgiven the personal affront which that cowherd boy, who had now become important, had offered him.

Rukmini knew this very well. She too had not forgotten the cowherd boy, who had treated her brother like a naughty child and saved the Yadavas of Mathura from the tyrannical grip of Kamsa. And she always remembered how lovingly he had clung to his mother Devaki and how gracefully he had declined the throne of the Yadavas which was offered to him.

Trivakra was a great friend to her in Mathura. The common bond between them was Krishna, and Trivakra sometimes sent messages to her by Brahmans who were travelling from one kingdom to another attending sacrificial or religious ceremonies.

From the reports which her father and brother received from time to time, she had learnt, her heart throbbing with pride, of Krishna's exploits of killing the Punyajana demon, of vanquishing the King of Vaivasvatapuri and of bringing back Sandipani's son.

Whenever she heard about Krishna, she dreamt of the lovely face which she remembered so well, and invariably sighed. He was once a cowherd; his father was only a Yadava chief. She was on the other hand a royal princess destined for some king who would prove a formidable ally in her brother's ambitious plan to conquer wide domains and some day establish an empire, when Jarasandha would have joined his forefathers.

The latest news was terrifying. Jarasandha had decided to kill Krishna and his brother; her own brother was going to help him do it. Rukmini, wildly agitated, stormed into the presence of her father and brother.

'Rukmi, you shall not go to kill Krishna. What has he done to you? Why should you help Jarasandha in this feud?' asked Rukmini impatiently.

'You better keep to the *antahpur*.[1] Don't try to interfere in affairs of state,' said Rukmi angrily.

'Why not? It is *my* father's kingdom as much as *your* father's,' replied Rukmini, her beautiful eyes flashing in anger. 'Father, why do you listen to him? Do you know what he is going to do? He wants you to be a vassal of Jarasandha.'

'What do you understand of statecraft?' asked Rukmi. 'Kundinapura is now a powerful State because of our alliance with the Emperor of Magadha. And some day I want to see you become an empress. And also the sister of an emperor,' he added with a smile.

'I don't want any of your favours,' retorted Rukmini. 'Father, father, why don't you say something to this wild man?'

'My child, don't excite yourself. We can't afford to quarrel with Jarasandha. If we are not his friends, he will destroy Vidarbha, as he did in the time of my father Kaishika,' said King Bhishmaka.

'Cowards! Cowards!' exclaimed the irate young woman and swept out of their presence. 'I wish I were a man.' Rukmi laughed contemptuously in reply.

Then she went to her grandfather Kaishika, a pious man, who, with his brother Kratha, had retired from affairs of state when the power of Vidarbha was shattered by Jarasandha. She spent her anger showering abuse on her brother and ended by shedding tears.

'My dear child, these are men's affairs which you should leave to be managed by them. Your business is to think of the young man who will come to seek your hand,' said the old man.

'I can't even do that. I am going to be sold to some henchman of Rukmi's to secure a convenient alliance. He will be some fellow as foolish as Rukmi himself,' said Rukmini.

'My child, you are beautiful, intelligent and sensible. I am sure, in the *swayamvara* which will be held for you, you will choose the finest of men.'

'No fine men will ever be invited to my *swayamvara* if Rukmi has a hand in issuing invitations,' said Rukmini sullenly. 'I kow what it is to be born a princess—a chattel for barter,' she added. 'But I tell you I will not be a chattel for Rukmi to dispose of as he wills.'

Rukmi went to join Jarasandha's forces, and Rukmini, morning and night, thought of what might be happening

to Devaki's dark-coloured son whom they fondly called Govinda and whose eyes and smile haunted her.

One day the family priest sent word to her through the old woman who had been a foster-mother to her and brought her up from infancy.

'Princess, Trivakra has sent you a message,' said the old woman.

'Trivakra ! Oh mother, tell me what it is,' Rukmini's heart was shot through with a premonitory pang. Had something happened to Krishna ?

'A young man has brought a message from her. He says you know him. His name is Uddhava,' said the woman.

'God of all gods, it's Uddhava, is it ? What news has he brought ? ' asked Rukmini impatiently. She knew this inseparable friend of Krishna's. If he came in person, the news must be portentous.

'He won't tell Gurudeva. He says he wants to tell you personally,' said the woman.

'Ask Gurudeva to bring him to Grandfather. I am about to go to him,' Rukmini said.

Forthwith she went to her grandfather and told him that a messenger had arrived for him from Mother Devaki. Old Kaishika knew from Rukmini's talk that she had come to look upon Devaki as a mother, and agreed to receive the messenger in secret. Rukmini knew that her grandfather loved her dearly ; in fact, he was the only one who had doted upon her from her childhood, since she had lost her mother.

In the afternoon, Uddhava presented himself before Kaishika and Rukmini.

'I have come from Mathura with a message from its lord and from Mother Devaki. The army of Jarasandha is marching on Mathura to capture Krishna and Balarama. As Mathura is not strong enough to face a siege, Krishna and Balarama have decided to leave the town,' said Uddhava.

Rukmini could not resist a sigh of relief.

'They want to go to the Mahendra Mountains where the venerable Bhargava is likely to meet them. They will be passing through Vidarbha on foot in a few days' time. I came on horseback in advance to convey to the Princess a message from Mother Devaki,' said Uddhava.

The old King looked at his grand-daughter and saw her blush deeply. This girl was a wonder, the way she could win hearts.

'Yes?' he asked.

'Mother Devaki wanted me to enquire of the Princess whether she could contrive a safe passage for Krishna and Balarama through Vidarbha. Prince Rukmi, we know, has joined Jarasandha's forces,' Uddhava added.

Rukmini looked at her grandfather anxiously. She had little power to provide safe conducts.

'Grandfather, we must provide a safe conduct for Mother Devaki's sons,' said Rukmini.

'My child, your father won't allow it. And your brother has gone to kill them,' said Kaishika.

'My grandfather will do it and my brother's sister will save them,' Rukmini said smiling.

'No, no, I can't do it. If Rukmi comes to know of it, he will be very angry,' Kaishika said.

Rukmini's face grew red and copious tears fell from her eyes. In a piteous voice she cried: 'No one in this world is mine — neither my father, nor my brother — not even my grandfather. Oh mother, when you died, why did you not take me away with you?' She hid her face in her hands, sobbing.

This piteous outburst moved the old man's heart. He said: 'My child, don't cry! Don't! I will do as you wish. Are you happy now?' He patted her on the back affectionately. 'Uddhava, change your garments and come and stay with me as a Brahman. Also bring Vasudeva's sons here when they come. I will see that nothing happens to them in Vidarbha.'

In a few days' time, two ascetics in bark clothes, with matted locks, accompanied by Uddhava, who now looked

very much a Brahman, came to the palace of Kaishika, and were hospitably received by him. When Rukmini came in to serve them food, as she insisted she should, her heart was racing. Here, before her, was the handsome form, the loving smile and the flashing eyes which she had never forgotten — and, above all, there was that manner of his which made everyone feel that Krishna belonged particularly to him or her. And Krishna, having been told all that she had done for him, smiled his thanks.

Then Kaishika asked Krishna and Balarama about affairs in Mathura and the former's exploits in Vaivasvatapuri. As Krishna narrated the events which led up to the rescue of Sandipani's son from Vaivasvatapuri, Rukmini avidly listened to the miraculous achievements and her indignation was roused when she heard how the Nagakanya preferred her mother to her husband — though it gave her a sense of relief.

'Why did you not keep her back?' asked Kaishika.

'I can't make a Nagakanya happy. She must always be concerned with her mother,' Krishna said.

'But supposing she had no mother?' asked Kaishika, slyly looking at Rukmini. He always loved to tease his grand-daughter.

'Then perhaps she would be concerned with herself,' Krishna replied mockingly. 'All beautiful women are. Isn't that so?' he added as he turned to Kaishika who laughed indulgently.

'That is intended for you,' the old King told his grand-daughter.

'You can never stop Krishna making you look a fool,' burst in Balarama with a loud laugh. 'He only wants a wife who is concerned with himself.'

'Then Krishna will never find a good wife,' said Kaishika wisely.

'Who knows? I may not,' replied Krishna.

Kaishika had already made arrangements for a few Brahmans from Kundinapura to join a caravan which was going to Karavirapura on a pilgrimage. The two young ascetics also went with them.

14

BHARGAVA RAMA OF THE BATTLE AXE

Krishna and Balarama parted from the caravan when the Sahya Mountains came in sight and went towards Mount Mahendra. It was a pleasant journey. Wherever they chose to stay for the night, the villagers offered hospitality. Balarama enjoyed the mountain air and the glory of the peaks bathed in the sunshine. Krishna was as cheerful as ever, talking of the old days in Vrindavan.

'Krishna, you are clever. Tell me one thing,' Balarama asked once. 'Why do these things happen to us, and not to others?'

'Things happen to us because we are born to relish life in its fullness,' replied Krishna. 'If we had been brought up like our cousins, we would have missed all the things we have seen and learnt.'

'Don't you ever regret having left Radha, whom you loved so much?' asked Balarama.

Krishna looked surprised. 'She is always with me — always. That is why I never feel unhappy.'

Balarama shook his head. 'You are very difficult to understand. I did not like your offering to flee from Mathura. I would have stayed there and fought to the last.'

'Brother, our mission is to establish Dharma, not merely to satisfy our vanity by being heroic. Sometimes, even an action which ordinarily men look upon as cowardice, becomes Dharma,' said Krishna. 'What I saw was the situation as it actually was. I reasoned it out to Father and Uncle Akrura even before noble Vikadru spoke about it to King Ugrasena. And they both approved of what I said.'

Balarama gave up the effort to understand his younger brother.

On the slopes of Mount Mahendra, Krishna and Balarama saw a large hermitage. Enquiring of a goat-herd, they found that the great sage Parashurama Bhargava of the Battle Axe, worshipped as Lord Shiva Himself, had come to stay there for some days. Evidently Gargacharya had already informed the sage of their coming.

Krishna felt his heart throb with anticipation. He was soon going to meet the mighty Parashurama who kept all his vigour, even though his pupils, shrunk with age, were tottering to their end. He was a living embodiment of ancestral greatness, Krishna thought. His name evoked in eminent sages a reverence generally reserved for the departed ancients of the race and it was never uttered by a seasoned warrior except with admiration and worship ; and they often called Bhargava, Bhagavan, the *Lord* Himself.

His was a strange life, Krishna thought. He had lived in times almost forgotten, when the banks of the sacred Saraswati echoed to the chants of the great sages of old — Vasishtha, Vishwamitra and Jamadagni. He had fought a host of rulers whose barbarian defiance of the Aryan code threatened to overwhelm Dharma in its very home. He had killed Kartavirya, who was said to possess the strength of a thousand arms, with his bare hands.

He had conquered the world ; the land from the snow-clad Himalayas to the rolling Narmada had trembled at his name ; then, at the height of his glory, he had given away the world to Sage Kashyapa to be ruled by kings pledged to Dharma.

He had then come to the west coast and demanded from the sea new land for him to live on. The sea had willingly yielded up the region on which there sprang up the great port of Shurparaka, visited by a hundred ships from across the sea.

Still he was not of the past. He was a living shrine, to which people came from far-off lands to gain solace,

strength or wisdom. And all who came returned with the impression that he was God Himself.

With a feeling of reverence, Krishna and Balarama approached the *ashram.* A boy showed them the way to the giant tree under which Bhargava sat, firm and unbent, in front of a sacrificial fire.

He was very tall and still sinewy, though his skin was creased by a thousand wrinkles. A long, white beard and a beautiful head of hair covered half his body, while a tiger skin was wrapped round his loins. A long battle axe — the terrific weapon famed in story and song — which had laid numberless crowned heads low, reposed by his side, and also a large *kamandalu,* or bowl, now his only possession.

At some distance, some old disciples were tending a few cows. A little further away there were huts, in front of which some youngsters were chanting the *Vedas.*

When they saw Bhargava, Krishna and Balarama went with hurried steps and prostrated themselves before him.

'Lord of wisdom, Guru of all gurus, we, the sons of Vasudeva, seek your blessing,' Krishna said, overwhelmed by the majestic presence.

'My blessing, sons of Vasudeva. I knew you were coming here to meet me, and so I am here to welcome you,' said Bhargava with an almost childlike smile and in tones of sincere affection. The eyes, which had once flashed fire and had inspired awe in mighty kings, were now pools of affectionate understanding. 'I have heard a lot about both of you. But first go and take your bathe, perform your *sandhya,* eat your food and rest a little. Then we will talk about you.'

A disciple, who looked extremely old, came and took the brothers away to the huts.

When they were fully refreshed, Krishna and Balarama returned, sat at the feet of the Master and told him how they had to leave Mathura and travel all that way.

'What you have done is right. Death should only be courted when Dharma demands it ; otherwise, courting it is either vanity or cowardice — a flight from Dharma.'

'The world is sure to say that we fled out of cowardice,' said Krishna.

'What the world thinks is generally wrong. Sometimes action is heroic; but at times, retreat from action demands greater heroism. You have done well,' said Bhargava.

'We hope, with your blessing, lord, to seek an asylum with King Shrigalava Vaasudeva of Karavirapura. He is a Yadava,' said Krishna.

'Shrigalava will never give you help,' said the Master. 'He is selfish, cruel and arrogant. He believes himself the God of gods. He has been persecuting all the men of learning and has thrown all the venerable Acharyas into a pit. He will never grant you asylum unless you deny all the gods and accept him as the great God, Mahadeva. And even if he does so, it will only be to give you up to Jarasandha for a price,' said the Sage. 'And if ever you have to deal with him, remember he is a master bowman, and never forgets that he is one.'

'But if we don't go to Karavirapura, where shall we go?' asked Balarama.

'How do you think Jarasandha will react to your flight?' asked Bhargava.

'I don't think he will harass the Yadavas in Mathura, for he only wants them to surrender us to him. At the most he will extract a heavy tribute. But as I see it, he will not give us up. He will try to find out where we have gone and pursue us to the bitter end,' said Krishna.

'It is possible that he may find it a waste of effort to come all the way to find you here,' suggested the Sage.

'Perhaps you are right, Master. But my killing Uncle Kamsa has been the greatest blow to his prestige. My uncle was his most powerful and loyal ally. His death has shaken Jarasandha's hold over the other kings. Even those who are with him consider that Mathura led by us would be a potential danger to his imperial position,' said Krishna.

'I agree you are in a difficult position. But if I were you, I would not seek safety with any prince however good

he may be. He would sacrifice you to his self-interest. You must grow powerful by yourself,' said the Sage.

'I wish we could,' said Krishna.

After a little pause, Bhargava said : 'Farther away, I know of the Gomantaka Hill on the shores of the sea. That would suit you.'

'Can it stand a siege?' Krishna asked.

'It is an inaccessible hill. Neither horses, nor chariots, nor elephants can climb it. It is also not difficult to defend it against odds, for the path to reach the top is steep and narrow,' said the Sage and added, 'It is a beautiful hill. A very harmless and hospitable people live there. They are called *garudas,* because they march to battle with eagle faces. They are devoted to me because once I saved them from destruction. Their chief is a very kind man. He will make you happy, and never fail you.'

So they went to Gomantaka, led by Jamadagni's mighty son, leaving Karavirapura on one side. They crossed a dense jungle, and saw before them the most lovely hill imaginable, rich with trees and creepers and birds of varied hues, but straight, steep and inaccessible.

As they went on climbing the hill, Balarama could not restrain his curiosity.

'Lord, having conquered all the kings, why did you give away the earth? If you had not done so, all these turbulent kings would not have raised their heads. And Jarasandha would never have dreamt of world conquest,' said Balarama.

'My boy, it has been an enigma to many. But they don't know why I took upon myself to fight Kartavirya and his allies. He had become so powerful that no one could withstand him. He defied the eternal *Rita;* he derided the Gods; he mocked at our ancient ways. Nothing was sacred to him. He thought he was above all things, and his will was the law for all. He burnt the *ashram* of the greatest of *rishis,* Vasishtha ; he destroyed our *ashram* and killed my father, the venerable Jamadagni. In fact he took delight in uprooting all that we, Aryans,

cherish as greatly as our lives. The earth was calling for his destruction,' said the Sage.

'How did it happen? What were our kings doing?" asked Krishna.

'They were too busy fighting among themselves to see how great a danger Kartavirya was. For Kartavirya was not merely a king; he stood for all that was demoniac; fraud, force, egotism. By his very existence he poisoned life at its very source,' said the Sage. 'For life is *Tapas*, self-discipline, which conquers the weaknesses which make us, men, such contemptible worms.'

'Ultimately you overcame them all.'

'When such *asuric* (demoniac) power establishes its sway, it listens to nothing; it then deserves to be destroyed. The Haihayas combined against me, as the *asuras* once did against the gods. Yet I vanquished them. I made the world safe for those who want to pursue *Rita, Satya* and *Tapas*. But I had never loved power, nor pomp. I never wanted to rule. My mission was to re-establish Dharma. That was ended, so I gave up everything,' said the Sage.

'The way you stepped down from the power you held was wonderful.'

'There was nothing wonderful about it. I had to bear arms; *adharma* had to be rooted out. *Kshatra tej*, the might of valour, is necessary at times, but *Brahma tej*, the might of the spirit, is essential at all times, if the world is to live in conformity with the eternal ordinances of *Rita* —what you call Dharma now,' said the Sage.

In the footprints of the Sage, Krishna and Balarama climbed the winding trail which ran up the steep incline to Gomantaka. On the top was a fairly large plateau with running streams and groves of shady trees.

When the people residing on the hill learnt of the arrival of Parashurama, they flocked to him—men, women and children—and fell at his feet, offered cocoanuts and flowers, and sought his blessing. The Sage hailed them affectionately, many by their names.

Then the chief of the *garudas* came with his sons; they all wore masks which made their faces look like eagles

—a mark of royal dignity, which they wore on important occasions. Their womenfolk also followed and offered worship to the Master. Then they took the guests under the shade of a tree, and offered them luscious fruits and cocoanut milk for their refreshment.

After Krishna and Balarama had begun to feel they were welcome there, the Master prepared to depart. Just before going, he told Krishna: 'Son of Vasudeva, I know all you have done and what you are. Don't forget, you have a mission; to secure the triumph of Dharma—not the *dharma* which flies away from all that is life, but the Dharma which affirms life and makes it god-like. Your people who call you a god are right. They have faith in you. But you must have faith in yourself. You can be a god only if you fill yourself with the faith that you are one. I will now go. Perhaps I will not meet you again. But my blessing is with you both. And if you need me, send one of the *garudas*. He will find me out wherever I happen to be.'

So saying, the Master blessed them and also the worshipping crowd of the *garudas,* which had gathered to bid him farewell and beg him to return soon.

Then, with the battle axe in his hand, from which he was never separated, he stepped down the hill with the agility of an youngster, a living symbol of unfading might.

15

BRIHADBALA PLAYS THE DIPLOMAT

The Emperor Jarasandha's army and the contingents which his allies had brought with them, had camped on the banks of the Yamuna, two days' march from Mathura. The force consisted of over two hundred war chariots for warriors of rank, fifty elephants, five hundred riders and over two thousand bowmen.

Noon time was approaching. Grooms were busy washing the horses. Men were having their bathe in the river or preparing their food. The mahouts were watering the elephants. On all sides, lances, swords and battle axes made of copper were seen flashing in the sunshine as the soldiers went to and fro.

A little further off, under a giant banyan tree, Jarasandha himself was preparing for his midday meal. He was tall and sinewy. A master wrestler, he was heavy of weight and, though due to age his stomach had begun to droop, he was as vigorous as he had been twenty years before. He had a shock of greying hair and a well-trimmed beard. In spite of a powerful jaw, he had a mobile face, which could, when he wanted, express his mood forcefully, but when he did not so want, could conceal his thoughts. Just now it wore a malicious look as he washed his hands and feet.

Drupada, the King of Panchala, had declined to give Jarasandha's army a passage through his domains. It was an impertinence, Jarasandha felt. At any other time he would have simply marched on Kampilya and burnt it down. But now he did not want to be deflected from the purpose before him, though Drupada's refusal had made his task of marching on Mathura difficult.

Then he smiled. Drupada would pay the price of this impertinence some day. But the day had not yet come. He must deal with Vasudeva's sons first.

His face again lapsed into a malicious grin as he thought of Krishna and Balarama. The two cowherds had killed his son-in-law, Kamsa, and by so doing offered him a mortal affront. Before everything, therefore, that death must be avenged. Both the boys must be cut to pieces at the very place where they had laid their sacrilegious hands on the Prince of Mathura.

At a short distance, a meal was being served on banana leaves. His allies and generals, who generally dined with him, were waiting for him. He glanced at them. King Damaghosha of Chedi had not yet come for the meal, from his camp. This was unusual for Damaghosha, the soul of courtesy, who was very punctilious in such matters. Ordinarily he presented himself at meals early enough to receive Jarasandha. Something unexpected appeared to have happened.

The Emperor, followed by two warriors armed with copper lances, strode over to the place where the meal was being served. His friends and generals offered him salutations as he took the central seat which was a little higher than those of the rest.

'Shalva, where is Damaghosha?' he asked Shalva, the King of Saubha, whose seat was to his immediate left. 'Does he suffer from indigestion?' he asked and laughed loudly.

'Lord, Chediraj has just sent word that he will be a little late,' replied Shalva, his teeth flashing out white in his swarthy face. He was the Emperor's trusted ally, prized for his cunning and ruthlessness, a wiry, dark-haired man with a handsome face and cunning look.

'Messengers of peace have arrived from Mathura,' one of the Magadhan generals, who was standing in front of his seat, said with folded hands.

'Messengers!' exclaimed Jarasandha with a frown. 'I want the heads of Vasudeva's sons, not empty-handed messengers.'

They all sat down to their meal silently, for the Emperor was frowning all the time. He did not like Damaghosha dabbling in this affair. His queen Shrutashrava, a very powerful woman, was Vasudeva's sister and, though he had joined this campaign readily, Jarasandha was not sure what tricks he might be up to.

Soon Damaghosha came, offered salutations to Jarasandha and asked to be forgiven for being late for the meal. He was quiet, slow-spoken and self-composed.

'Have men come to you from Mathura?' asked Jarasandha with a frown.

'Not to me, to you, my lord,' said Damaghosha, smiling and unperturbed.

'Have they brought the heads of Krishna and Balarama?' Jarasandha asked loudly, so that others might catch his words.

'The boys have fled from Mathura,' said Damaghosha.

'What!' exclaimed Jarasandha in surprise.

'Akrura has come accompanied by Brihadbala, the King's grandson, and Gada, to show his submission to you, my lord,' said Damaghosha. 'And he would not tell a lie.'

The Emperor lapsed into silence. Then, feeling that his silence might be construed by the company as disappointment, he said, 'I don't believe it. I will talk to them after the meal.'

'As the lord of Magadha commands,' said Damaghosha.

'Have we sent a contingent of bowmen in advance to prepare the camp for the night, Shalva?' asked Jarasandha.

'Yes, lord, they left in the night,' said Shalva.

Jarasandha returned to the place where he generally rested under the banyan tree after meals, asking only Damaghosha and Shalva to keep him company. He stretched himself on his couch and ordered the officer in attendance to bring the leaders of Mathura to him.

It was a strange situation. He had announced to the world that he would avenge Kamsa's death. He was pledged to be satisfied with nothing but the heads of the two

cowherd boys. He had summoned his allies to bring their contingents to achieve that purpose. And now the boys had slipped away from his grasp!

When Akrura, Brihadbala, the son of Vasudeva's brother Devabhaga, and Gada offered a salutation by prostrating themselves before him, Jarasandha suddenly sat up with a vicious scowl.

'What is this silly story that you have brought?' he asked in an insulting manner.

'Mighty Chakravarti, it is neither a story nor silly,' said Akrura, with that frank mildness which generally characterised his way of speaking. 'Krishna and Balarama left Mathura by night three days ago.'

'I don't believe you. You must have concealed them somewhere,' shouted Jarasandha, trying to frighten Akrura.

Akrura stood with folded hands, patience in his eyes and a smile on his face. The shrewd Jarasandha, in spite of a show of temper, did not fail to notice that Brihadbala was afraid.

'Chediraj, Shalva, leave me alone for a moment. I want to talk to the Best of Vrishnis,' said Jarasandha. He did not know how this interview would shape and did not want the camp to gossip about it. Also he did not want his allies to know that he was feeling undecided; he would only face them when his mind was made up.

'As the lord pleases,' said Damaghosha and Shalva.

While the others were leaving, Jarasandha said: 'Chediraj, take Brihadbala with you. I want to talk to him after you have done.'

Damaghosha placed a hand on Brihadbala's shoulders and took him away.

'Lord of the Vrishnis, you have the reputation of being a saint. If you don't tell me the truth, I will burn Mathura to the ground,' said Jarasandha.

'I know that the lord is powerful enough to do whatever he wants. But I will never tell a lie,' said Akrura.

'Why did they fly away, the cowards?' demanded Jarasandha contempetuously.

'They were not cowards. They did not want the Yadavas to die defending Mathura for their sake, so they sacrificed themselves. It was heroic of them to brave the charge of cowardice,' replied Akrura.

'The Yadavas were not prepared to stand by them,' sneered Jarasandha.

'We were ready to lay down our lives for them. But they were firm in their resolve,' said Akrura.

'I don't believe it,' said Jarasandha with a dark frown. 'I am going to punish you all the same for sending away the cowherds.'

'We have already anticipated the lord's decision,' said Akrura with a patient smile. 'A mighty Chakravarti, when he is angry, is not likely to forgive us so easily.'

'Angry! Why do you say I am angry? I am out only to mete out just punishment. You call yourself a saintly person and want me to condone the assassination of my son-in-law and your Prince,' said Jarasandha with a sneer.

'Forgive me, lord of Magadha,' Akrura said in an unperturbed voice. 'I am not a saint, nor do I call myself one. I only try to follow Dharma, and that very humbly. And it would scarcely be Dharma to destroy Mathura for the fault of the sons of Vasudeva,' he added as if correcting Jarasandha.

The Emperor looked at Akrura with a scowl. Akrura smiled patiently. 'I am not here to justify what Vaasudeva did. But how many Yadavas did Kamsa kill? How many did he drive into the wilderness? How many women were made the victims of his lust?' After a pause, he added: 'How many sons of Vasudeva did he kill at their very birth! Even you, lord, condoned all this for years.'

'You are a clever man. But I am going to destroy Mathura all the same,' said Jarasandha, exercising great self-control. For he could not remain blind to the dangers of treating such a man offensively.

'We have no doubt about it, lord. Half the Yadavas have already left Mathura. The others are ready to do so

the moment we return empty-handed. We will leave Mathura to you without striking a blow,' Akrura said quietly.

'I will pursue you wherever you go,' said Jarasandha.

'I am sure you will. But the venerable Bhishma, and King Drupada of Panchala, have both promised to grant us asylum in their kingdoms,' said Akrura.

Jarasandha was silent for a while. Drupada had already put him in a difficult position by declining to give him passage through his territory.

'That is what I have come here to beg of you, mighty King. The boys whom you wanted have escaped; your pledge will therefore remain unredeemed even if you destroy Mathura. What will you do with a city without men and women, cows and horses? It will be an empty reward for such an adventure on the part of so powerful a monarch as the Chakravarti of Magadha. Will not the world laugh at you?' asked Akrura in an appealing tone.

'Have you come to tell me this, Akrura? You know I can have your tongue pulled out for this effrontery,' said Jarasandha, unable to keep control over his temper at the temerity of Akrura.

'I have already told you, lord, that there is no limit to your power, unless you impose it upon yourself. It is because you are so powerful that I have come confident that you will listen to me. Be generous. It is only the strong who can forgive; the weak can never punish and therefore can never forgive. If you listen to us, perhaps it will hurt your pride, but it will surely raise your prestige,' said Akrura slowly, with due humility.

'You have a bold tongue, sweet yet dangerous. Tell me where the boys have gone and I will listen to you,' said Jarasandha.

'How can I say where they are or where they may have gone? They will try to hide somewhere, where you cannot reach them,' replied Akrura.

'You are very clever, Akrura,' said Jarasandha after a little pause. 'Go now. I will talk to you tomorrow mor-

ning. In the meantime, send me Brihadbala, Vasudeva's nephew.'

'As the lord commands,' said Akrura and withdrew.

Jarasandha confessed to himself that Akrura was right. If he destroyed Mathura, the death of Kamsa would remain unavenged and his friends and enemies would condemn him for wreaking vengeance childishly on an empty city, while the infuriated Yadavas would augment the strength of the Kurus and the Panchalas. He thought for a while and called his personal counsellor, who during Kamsa's lifetime had lived in Mathura for years as the adviser of his daughters, and obtained from him all the information he needed. Brihadbala was the second son of Devabhaga, the brother of Vasudeva the lord of the Shooras. His mother Kamsaa was Kamsa's sister and the favourite daughter of King Ugrasena. His younger brother, Uddhava, was Krishna's great friend.

When the personal counsellor left, Jarasandha saw Brihadbala standing timidly at a distance, awaiting the Chakravarti's command.

Brihadbala was in real fear. He had always heard the Emperor's name with trepidation and, when Kamsa was killed, he had felt certain that Mathura would be destroyed. He would have preferred to flee away from the city, but he was the son of King Ugrasena's favourite daughter Kamsaa, and Vasudeva's nephew. He was the prisoner of his family connections and had to keep up his courage lest his elders should condemn him as a traitor.

Brihadbala was sure that, now that Krishna and Balarama had been allowed to escape, Jarasandha would raze Mathura to the ground. At the moment, therefore, he felt as if he was walking into the jaws of death.

However, the Emperor looked at him and smiled. The frown had suddenly disappeared from his brows. The Emperor was in a happy mood, Brihadbala thought, since he beckoned to him cordially to come nearer. He went and prostrated himself before the monarch, who bent down from the couch on which he was sitting and patted him on the back.

Jarasandha was a good kindly man, Brihadbala thought. When his people in Mathura had said he was a cruel, wicked man, they had been wrong.

'Brihad, my blessing,' said Jarasandha in an almost affectionate voice. 'I hope your Grandfather Ugrasena is well. I know you well, dear boy. Sit down. How is your noble mother? I have heard how all these years she has served the old King — even when he was in prison. Do you live with the King or with your father?'

'I live with my Grandfather. My mother also generally lives with him, lord,' said Brihadbala. His heart was drawn to this monarch, who was so kind and cordial. He could not understand how his people did him so great an injustice.

'I know you are the favourite grandchild of the King. I wish you would come to Girivraja some time. It would help to cement the bond between Mathura and myself,' said Jarasandha.

Brihadbala was moved by this flattery, a luxury which he seldom enjoyed and which, in his family, was lavished on Krishna. Now that Jarasandha had put things in that way, he was reminded of his ambition to succeed to his grandfather on the throne of Mathura, seeing that the old King had no sons left. With the Emperor so friendly, it struck him that his dreams might come true, Krishna being out of the way. And — who knew? — he might be as great a king of Mathura as his maternal uncle Kamsa . . . basking in imperial favours.

'Lord, we are all very anxious to be loyal to you,' Brihad improvised. Then he stopped in hesitation lest he had uttered something which might contradict his uncle Akrura and thereby prove that he himself was a liar.

'Yes, we can be friendly, now that the two cowherds have run away,' said Jarasandha smiling in a friendly way and watching Brihad with wary eyes.

Brihad was happy to find his sentiments echoed by so great a man. If he could save Mathura—he thought—from Jarasandha's anger, he would now become the hero of the

Yadavas, as Krishna had been before he had fled out of sheer cowardice.

'Now that Vasudeva's sons have left Mathura, if you would show mercy to Mathura—' Brihadbala could not help showing his extreme anxiety to please the Emperor.

'I have a mind to destroy Mathura, but if a young man like you were its leader, I might be merciful,' said Jarasandha with an encouraging smile. He could read Brihad's heart as clearly as a villager reads the signs for rain in the sky.

Brihad rose to the bait. 'Mighty Chakravarti, I beg you to be merciful to Mathura. My uncle Akrura must have already told you about our request. If you consent to it, you will have my eternal gratitude.' Brihad had become anxious to be on the very best terms with the powerful Emperor. He added, 'I am not in power yet, but my uncle Vasudeva is the chief of the Shooras and my Grandfather loves me. He has great confidence in me,' correcting himself.

The shrewd Jarasandha saw the conflict which was passing in Brihad's mind between loyalty to the Yadavas and a personal ambition to acquire his favour.

'I like you very much, Brihad,' said Jarasandha. 'If you had been the *yuvaraja*[1] of Mathura, I would have never thought of destroying Mathura. But who knows?'

Brihadbala's heart opened out to the warmth of Jarasandha's friendly interest in him. The time had come to strike a bargain too, thought the diplomat in him....

'Lord, listen to me. Give me the credit of saving Mathura, and perhaps what you wish may come to pass,' said Brihad, as the prospect of his dream coming true appeared to come nearer.

The wily Emperor smiled in a friendly way—really he was laughing at the way in which the young man was playing up to his expectations. 'But what if Krishna returns?' he asked.

'Krishna will never return,' Brihad said and added, 'I am afraid.'

'How do you know? He may have just gone over to the kingdom of the Kurus to seek Bhishma's aid,' said Jarasandha.

'Oh, no. He went south,' Brihad admitted unguardedly.

'To ? .....' asked Jarasandha innocently and waited for a reply.

'To some far off place,' Brihad tried to evade the reply.

'To some forest on the bank of the Narmada, perhaps?' asked Jarasandha.

Brihad did not feel inclined to be discourteous to such a kindly monarch who asked him questions so directly. 'No, I think to the banks of the Venya,' he said in a moment of frankness, and wishing to oblige Jarasandha.

'Perhaps to Karavirapura,' said Jarasandha as if it was a matter of no importance. Brihad was confused and Jarasandha could read an admission on his face. Then he continued : "Well, Brihadbala, if I comply with your request, it will be only for your sake. I hope some day you will be appointed the *yuvaraja* by King Ugrasena and then succeed your grandfather. It is only your due.'

Brihad was modestly silent. 'Who knows, your uncles Vasudeva and Akrura might step into your way,' added Jarasandha as if talking to himself. 'So, be careful what you do, my boy. And let me know if I can do something to help.'

With this parental benediction, spoken in the most affectionate voice he could command, the Emperor dismissed Brihadbala.

Next day, Jarasandha called his allies and his generals to a council and also commanded Akrura, Brihadbala and Gada to be present.

'I have thought over the request of Akrura and Brihadbala. I think they are right. To destroy Mathura, when the two sinners have fled, would be wanton destruction,' said Jarasandha.

Damaghosha, the King of Chedi, well knew the great depth which lay beneath Jarasandha's swift changes of

mood — a method he often used to confuse both friends and foes. So, he was not surprised. The others, however, were amazed at this outburst of generosity.

'Akrura, Brihadbala, I want the Mathura Yadavas to be my friends,' continued Jarasandha. 'I have a great regard for King Ugrasena, and particularly for you two. With a young chief like Brihadbala and an adviser like Akrura, Mathura may some day become worthy of our friendship.'

Then Jarasandha paused. King Damaghosha sensed that something sinister was now going to follow.

'I will not levy a heavy tribute on Mathura. I only want twenty-five elephants, a hundred chariots and two men's weight in gold. They must be delivered before the day of the full moon this month — ten days hence,' said Jarasandha, and added in a friendly tone, 'Akrura, if ever Krishna and Balarama return to Mathura, they must be handed over to me.'

Akrura thought for a while. 'We shall have to meet the demand, if you make it,' he said.

'That is very clever,' Jarasandha laughed. 'Now you can go, Akrura. Brihadbala, pay my respects to your Grandfather, Ugrasena.' Then he turned to his allies. 'Shalva, please go with Akrura to ascertain whether King Ugrasena agrees to my terms.'

Akrura and Brihadbala, after due salutations, left the Emperor, accompanied by Shalva.

Then Jarasandha turned to Damaghosha, who stood expecting a new move. 'Chediraj, we now have to unearth the boys who have gone underground. My pledge —to secure their heads — stands. We will now go and hunt them out.'

'We must find them, lord,' said Rukmi, the Prince of Vidarbha.

Damaghosha was in a difficult situation. If he appeared in the least hesitant to accede to the Emperor's wishes, that would be an end of him. He summoned all his astuteness. 'But how do we know where they have

gone?' he asked, playing for time to think. 'Where can we find them?'

'It will be easy to find them, I know. We will only take twenty chariots and fifty riders, so that we can catch up with them. What do you say, Chediraj?' asked Jarasandha and then added, 'If you cannot come with us, send your son Shishupala with us.'

Damaghosha was prompt in his reply: 'Why? We must go straight from here, as soon as the tribute is paid.'

'One of my generals has been to the King of Karavirapura once. With that king's help, he will trace where these cowherds have hidden themselves,' said Jarasandha.

Damaghosha was convinced that Jarasandha had learned where the sons of Vasudeva had gone, from Brihad, his brother-in-law's foolish son.

Damaghosha saw through Jarasandha's game and that he wanted to eliminate him from the affair of the alliance. He was a subordinate ally relying on the Emperor for whatever independence Chedi enjoyed. But he had always wanted a counter-balance to the overwhelming imperial power and, in the rise of Krishna, his kinsman, in Mathura, he had seen the possibility of such a factor. He had joined this invasion himself so as to intervene judiciously at an opportune moment in order to save Mathura. And now he did not want to place Vasudeva's sons completely at the mercy of Jarasandha, which would inevitably happen if his son Shishupala, who was completely under the Emperor's influence, were to join this new adventure in his stead.

16

'STAND UP, GARUDA'

Vainateya lay huddled up in a corner of the hut. Heart-broken, he heard the joyous shouts of his people as they welcomed the new guests whom his father was meeting in the open space on to which the huts of the chief's family abutted. He lay helplessly on a bed of dry grass and peeped out of a hole in the bamboo wall of the hut to see whether he could catch a glimpse of the guests.

Vainateya was the chief's eldest son. His name was derived from his mother Vinata. Five years ago he had been a bright Garuda, the hope of his father and their tribe, brave, intelligent and buoyant, excelling every young Garuda, running up and down the Gomantaka Hill. The whole tribe had then looked upon him with pride as its future chief.

Then the bright-eyed young Garuda, who jumped from crag to crag as if he was flying, became seriously ill. For days he lay in bed, groaning and tossing in high fever. When the fever subsided, his legs were paralysed. He was a cripple and was no longer the same person. All his bright world of hope was destroyed; his sunny temper was overclouded.

As month followed month, and the hope of recovery was given up, Vainateya developed a deep melancholy. He felt it a torture to lie huddled up in bed all the time, to be lifted from place to place only on occasion.

On the craggy heights of Gomantaka and in the forests which surrounded it, the ability to run and to jump, to shoot at birds with flint-tipped arrows and to race with wild beasts, was not sport but a necessity. Whoever could not take part in these activities was looked upon as cursed by the gods. Vainateya therefore could not bear to see

himself regarded with pity. It was galling to see that his own father, once so proud of him, viewed him with contempt. He had sensed that the chief was ashamed to have for a son a miserable creature cursed by the gods. His brothers, who used to look up to him as a leader, now thought of him as a nuisance. No one wanted him. This bitter conviction poisoned his life.

Day after day Vainateya would dream of the sunny days that he had spent in the forests, of the moonlit nights when, at the head of his companions, he had jumped from crag to crag leading the game of playing at eagles. For the tribe of Garudas thought that all its members were born of the spirit of Suparna, the golden eagle, their divine guardian. Often, in a waking dream, he would see himself running, jumping, racing down the Hill on swift feet, covering the distance from Gomantaka to Karavirapura and back in a single night. But now even those dreams had ceased to be vivid. If he dreamt of those experiences at all, it left him shivering with a devastating sense of helplessness.

When the sun set every evening, he looked forward to those dreams though they left him more miserable than he was during the day. When the sun rose, he had to prepare himself to face the neglect, contempt, sneers, and whispers, which were always aimed at his helplessness.

The proud spirit of Vainateya was crushed. He wanted to die rather than live as a contemptible heap of bones, cared for by none. Often he had thought of dragging himself to the precipice and taking the fatal fall into the sea. But every time the will failed him. Then he heard of the arrival of Sage Parashurama at Gomantaka with two young strangers. Since he had become a cripple, the only visitor whom he saw occasionally was the Sage when he visited the Hill — and that too at a distance. When the Sage came, everyone rushed forward to greet him enthusiastically, and no one cared for the poor helpless Vainateya.

All the members of the family were excited about the new visitors. He had never seen a fair person except

Parashurama and his pupils. But these were princes, they said, very handsome and very kind. His heart was gripped by despair, though it felt an unfamiliar thrill of excitement at the stories he heard about these princes. Soon he began to ask himself questions: Would he be able to see them? Would they come to meet him?

He heard everyone talking breathlessly outside the hut. Yes, they were talking of the new visitors. How he wished he could go out and meet them! But he was a pitiable creature. Even if he could beg his father to bring them to him and even if he agreed to bring them, which was doubtful, they would look upon him — the hopeless cripple — with pity. And he wanted no one to pity him; that hurt him more, driving him to spend sleepless nights in sobbing out his sense of desolation.

Every Garuda was happy outside his hut. He hunted day after day with bows and arrows fitted with flint tips, roamed over the hill whenever he wanted, danced at night to the throbbing music of the war-drums, ran down the hill and raced to distant Karavirapura to fetch some necessaries or to carry destruction to some neighbouring hostile tribes. He, Vainateya, was denied these joys. His corner of the hut was his whole world; all he could do was sometimes to slither towards the door and watch the birds hopping from tree to tree. And now he could not even go out and see the new visitors.

He heard loud jubilant shouts. The visitors were coming towards the hut. He wanted to see them through the hole in the thatched wall, but could only see four legs —two heavy with muscles, two well-formed and soft. Alas! If the gods had not been angry, he would have been walking with them. But that good fortune was never going to be his. He glanced at his own legs and shivered with disgust.

His Mother came in to feed him. She lived in the inner compartment of the hut and was the only person who cared for him. But even she at times became irritated with his helplessness and wished herself dead. Now she was very excited. 'The two visitors are wonderful. One—

they call him Balarama — is a giant, bigger than anyone you can think of. When he laughs, you hear the sky thundering. The other — the younger one — is by far the most wonderful human being I have seen. They call him Vaasudeva. He is bluish in colour — almost sky-like. You would never think that anyone could have such a colour. And he smiles, oh, so beautifully. He patted every child on the head. He smiled at me also. Your father says he must be a god to be so handsome and so kind. Some day, my son, I will bring him to you,' she said and added, 'We have prepared three nice huts for them on the great rock, just facing the sea.'

Vainateya's eyes were filled with tears. Such a fine young man, so like a god, would never come and smile at him and speak to him. At the most he would say a word of sympathy. And he was sick of people's sympathy ; that meant that he was not one of them but something far, far different from others — something useless.

'I don't want to see him,' he muttered resentfully. He turned his face to the wall. His throat was choking with tears.

When his mother left, the sun was setting. Soon it would be time for everyone to go to sleep. He tried to sleep, but could not even close his eyes. He wanted to see the two god-like men whom everyone else, except him, had seen and admired. But he would never see them— no, never — as others saw them.

Vainateya sobbed for a while in the solitary hut. Then he dozed off out of sheer exhaustion. After a little while, he woke up. His mind began to work impatiently. It conjured up the sky-blue young man who was like a god —with a smile 'oh so wonderful,' his mother had said. He patted every child, she had said. Would he ever come to him and pat him on the back? How was that possible? If he came to him at all he would only pat him out of charity, not of love. Everybody thought he had been cursed by the gods, though he knew he was cleverer than most people. But it had had to be so, he thought ; other-

wise why should he alone, among all the swift-footed young Garudas, be unable to jump from crag to crag?

The fact was that he was a cripple, Vainateya thought bitterly, and he was always going to be one, and he would never see the princes whom everyone admired, greeting them with joyous shouts. But could he not see the sky-coloured prince whom they called Krishna ?

As he tossed about on his bed of dry grass, an idea slowly formed in his mind. He, the cripple, would go and see him. Yes, that was clear. He *must* see him. Yes, he would see him, whatever the cost.

Vainateya tried to sleep but, do what he might, sleep would not come to him. His imagination was on fire. It tried — but failed — to see a sky-blue prince with a wonderful smile, who looked like a god. He had never seen such a person. He and his people were dark, and no one that he knew could smile in the way Vaasudeva did by all accounts.

Vainateya was tired of merely thinking of the prince who was like a god. He had never seen a god, maybe Krishna was not like a god, but a god himself. He must, therefore, see him—and that too as early as possible.

Yes, it was a moonlit night and he could slither to the hut on the great rock near the sea. But how could he? For years he had never slithered such a long distance ; the utmost he could do was to pull himself out of the hut and lie gazing at the tree-tops as they swayed in the breeze. Snakes and wild beasts also made the forest paths dangerous to go along at night. How could he, a cripple, go and see the prince who was like a god? But his heart cried out : 'You must go and see him. Don't lose any time. Perhaps the young guest may go away tomorrow and you will never have a chance to see him.'

Vainateya, making an effort with his arms, sat up. The moonlight was everywhere over the Hill, as he could see from the half-open door—on the forest path, on the trees, on the leaves as they swayed in the breeze. He pressed his lips, rested his elbows on the ground and pulled himself off the bed. His paralysed leg slid along.

He gained the door. Everything was quiet. He waited for a while to find out whether his mother had been awakened by his movements. No, she was sleeping soundly in the next room. He made another attempt to pull himself out of the door, and his legs followed him. He looked at the Moon Goddess ; she was smiling encouragingly at him.

A doubt assailed him. How could he slither all the way to the precipice by the sea? He had not the strength to pull himself so far. He simply could not do it.

However, he *must* see the young man who was like a god, whatever happened. If he died on the way, that would be an end of this wretched lot to which he had been condemned. Then perhaps his spirit would jump about the Hill as his body had not been able to do. Anyway that would be a happy change.

He slithered forward along the path which led to the precipice overhanging the sea. His hands, never having been used to carry him over forest paths, were soft and, as he made his way, stones and thorns cut into them. He lay quiet for a while, tired and panting, removed some thistles which had clung to his body and looked at the Moon Goddess. The Goddess was smiling encouragingly. Perhaps she would help, thought Vainateya. Perhaps she would ask the prince who was god to meet him half-way. Perhaps she would not, for the Moon Goddess might like to test his determination to go to the hut on the precipice near the sea.

Vainateya gathered his strength and began to slide forward, getting out of breath, resting and dozing off now and again, rubbing off the thistles and removing the thorns from time to time as he went forward. As he was going along, he saw a wild beast glaring at him from behind a hedge. He trembled in every limb ; he thought he would be killed ; but the beast took to his heels. The Moon Goddess had protected him, or perhaps Vaasudeva, who, as his father had said, was a god.

A little further he saw a snake winding its way along the path. He was frightened again. But he thought

Vaasudeva might come to his help if he was a real god. He lay still, calling upon the sky-blue god to save him, and closed his eyes, expecting to be bitten the next moment. But the snake went past him without turning towards him. He was saved ! The prince must be a god, Vainateya thought.

After this miraculous escape, Vainateya felt a buoyancy he had not felt for years. Whatever happened now, this adventure of his was worth undertaking. He felt sure that the young god was calling him. And with new strength he started again on his laborious journey. His progress was very slow. The path was now stony and his hands and his body were bleeding in places. But he did not mind. The Moon Goddess was now disappearing below the sea and Aruna—the morning star — had risen in the east. It was a good sign, Vainateya thought. Aruna was the god of his tribe, being the elder brother of Suparna, the great Garuda of the golden wings, the divine father of his tribe.

Now Vainateya was crawling up the precipice. He felt the cold breeze of the sea and was revived. He could see the three huts which had been constructed for the guests. He knew that the third one was empty, for the mighty Parashurama, whom his father called the Master, had left Gomantaka the day before.

Vainateya made a final effort to pull himself over the plateau of the precipice. He strained his strength almost to breaking point to lift himself. But his hand slipped. He lost his hold and fell into a pit, a huddled heap. A piteous moan escaped him, and then he began to cry. He would not be able to see the god and must lie there till someone found him during the day or he must lie there unnoticed, and die.

The dawn was breaking, when he saw a giant shadow on the precipice with a big bamboo in its hand. Vainateya lay still in spite of the pain his fall had caused him. Someone had been attracted by his moans and would surely kill him thinking he was some prowling beast.

The shadow shouted at him in a strange tongue and a terrifying voice. Vainateya held his breath. This man with the fearsome voice might jump at any moment into the pit and break his head, and he would be killed at once. Oh, if he could only see the young god before he died!

The dawn was now in the sky and over the earth, and the shadow turned into a stalwart young man, who was trying to probe with the pole he had in his hand into the tall dry grass where he was lying. While the bamboo was being thrust about in the grass, it hit him and a moan escaped from him.

Suddenly Vainateya saw the hand of the tall young man arrested by another person whom he could not see. But he felt sure that it was the prince who was a god and whom he had come to see. 'Oh, if I could see him once — once only — before I die,' he muttered, and became unconscious.

Vainateya regained consciousness. Someone was cleaning the dirt from his body and washing his bleeding wounds — someone who had very soft hands. His whole body was aching and in some places it was smarting. He slowly opened his eyes a little. He saw a young man looking at him. He was the god ! The sky-blue skin, the compassionate smile, the long curly hair falling over his shoulders — there was no mistaking them.

He opened his eyes and looked at the handsome face eagerly. And the god smiled. His eyes, full of love, were enveloping him with a tenderness which he had never seen in anyone before. He knew now that this was his journey's happy end. He had found the god who loved him — an unhappy helpless cripple, whom no one cared for. He closed his eyes. Now he could die happily. He stretched out his bleeding hands and clung to the god's feet.

'You are my last refuge,' Vainateya muttered, and fainted.

Vainateya did not know how long after that he regained consciousness. Now he heard familiar voices : his father

talking excitedly to his uncle; his uncle, who knew the young man's language a little, trying to talk to him, though it cost him an effort; his mother interrupting them in a voice choked with tears. And a pleasant voice — it must be that of the sky-blue god — speaking in a language which only his uncle understood a little.

Vainateya opened his eyes and looked at his father, the great chief of the tribe. He shivered. His father was now scowling at him. 'Why did you slip away, you fool? We all became so anxious about you.' Vainateya knew that his father always despised him for being a cripple and therefore a blot on the proud family of the chief, every member of which was expected to outrun every other member of the tribe.

'How did you come all the way here, you mad fellow?' asked his uncle.

His mother added in a kindly voice: 'You are bruised all over your body, my boy.'

All the exultation went out of Vainateya's heart. He had not died on the way as he thought he would, and now he would be taken back to his corner of the hut to wait for death; that was worse than death itself. His father extended a hand for him to take and with its aid to lift himself into a sitting posture, but he turned away from the proffered hand. Clasping it would be to go back to his old misery, never perhaps to see the god again. In ill-concealed fear at the prospect, he turned away from his father and looked at the god, whom his uncle had been addressing respectfully as Vaasudeva.

Vaasudeva was smiling at him fondly. It was a smile of affection such as no one had wasted on him for years. No, no, no. He did not want to go back to his corner to be neglected, sneered at, scowled at. He would live here with this god or die.

He lifted himself on one elbow and clung to Krishna's legs with his other arm, looking up at him plaintively. Krishna bent down and, supporting the cripple, helped him to sit up.

'Garuda, don't you want to go with the noble chief?' asked Krishna. His uncle translated the question to him.

'No, no. I want to stay with you,' said Vainateya. He heard all his people laughing at his stupid words and felt crushed, and, fearing that Krishna would send him away, clung to his legs tightly.

'Vaasudeva, Vainateya says that he wants to stay with you,' translated his uncle. 'He is a little mad,' he added apologetically. 'You can't be troubled with a cripple.'

Krishna bent down further and enveloped Vainateya in his arms.

'Will you stay with me, Garuda?' asked Krishna.

His uncle translated the question to young Garuda, who broke into tears. 'How can I? I am a cripple,' he said as he sobbed. 'But—but, I have no one in the world but you,' he broke down completely. His father, mother and some of the other people laughed at this silly reply, which was translated to Krishna.

Krishna looked tenderly at young Garuda. 'And I am yours, Garuda. Who says that you are a cripple?' he asked, and the uncle translated his exact words.

In reply young Garuda looked tragically at his paralysed leg and hung down his head, as tears rolled down his cheeks.

'Are you going to keep this cripple with us, Krishna?' asked Balarama.

'Of course, I am,' Krishna said, and Balarama threw up his hands in despair.

'You are not a cripple,' said Krishna and pulled up young Garuda.

Young Garuda looked at Krishna, who spoke with authority, and a magic vigour coursed through his veins as he felt somehow that he could not but obey the god.

'Get up and stand on your legs,' commanded Krishna.

Everyone looked on in surprise. Young Garuda did not understand the words, but understood their significance. He tried to move his legs.

Krishna pulled him up. 'Stand up, Garuda.'

Young Garuda looked at Krishna worshipfully. The tone of quiet command gave him confidence. Supported by Krishna, he stood up.

'Now come with me,' said Krishna.

Unable to think what he was doing, Vainateya took a step.

His people, dazed at what they saw, looked at Krishna with silent awe, as Krishna, supporting young Garuda, led him to take steps for the first time for years.

A triumphant smile was on Vainateya's emaciated face as it lit up with a new brightness. Then the silence was broken. Young Garuda's mother rushed forward and, sobbing with delight, fell at the feet of Krishna.

17

GOMANTAKA HILL

After Parashurama had left Gomantaka, Balarama, for the first time in his life, felt a different person. By nature he was frank, easy-going, good-hearted and fond of enjoying life. Left to himself, he would have loved just to amuse himself, letting the worries of the world pass him by.

However, from infancy he had been a prisoner of the halo of worshipful admiration which his younger brother had created around them both. He loved his younger brother dearly and well knew how deeply he was loved in return. He had complete confidence in Krishna's wisdom, courage and resourcefulness, and admired the wonderful way in which he could bring about results. Both of them had been inseparable and he had always loved to bask in the universal affection and admiration for them both, which Krishna evoked. However, he hated being considered divine, for this homage forced him to make an unceasing effort to prove worthy of it. His expansive and easy-going nature, therefore, often felt cribbed.

When they went to Mathura, things became, if anything, worse. They were looked upon as gods; their exploits were spoken of with awe. Father, Mother, Guru Sandipani, and in fact all the Yadavas of Mathura, expected them to live in a superhuman way. Krishna came up to their hopes, for he was, by nature, made not merely to fulfil extravagant expectations, but to set a standard to the expectations themselves. And Balarama had to strive ceaselessly not to belie them.

On this Hill, Balarama felt that he was his own self. The Garudas were a happy-go-lucky people. They ate, drank and danced without restraint, laughing all the time. They — both men and women — wore bark loin-cloths,

used flowers as ornaments, and generally led a life free of the restraints which the highly-civilised Aryans in Mathura imposed upon themselves. They were also a very lively race. Men and women were fleet-footed and extraordinarily agile. They could climb up and down the hill, running along dangerous paths and jumping over deep ravines with the swift grace of mountain goats. The women did not walk ; they danced.

The Garudas as a people had habits which also struck Balarama's fancy. They claimed descent from the Divine Eagle, Suparna of the golden wings, and, in their festivities, they wore eagle masks, jumped about as if flying, and screeched as if they had been born the lords of the air.

The Garudas worked little. The coconut was the tree which granted them all they wished for ; it gave them food, clothing, drink, pillars and roofs for their homes, mats for sleeping on and fuel for fire. They ate bananas and tapioca, which grew in plenty on the Hill. They had tiny bows and flint-tipped arrows wherewith to shoot the birds, a delicacy which they thoroughly enjoyed.

Balarama fell in love with these people and entered into the spirit of their lives. They gave him flowers and he wore them. When they danced — the men in one row, and the women in another — he went into ecstasy. He slept during the day when the sun was high, and laughed at Krishna when the latter asked him to join him in exploring the Hill.

'Some day we shall have to defend Gomantaka against Jarasandha. We must get ready,' said Krishna.

'O Krishna, you can never enjoy life. Jarasandha will never come as far as this. If he comes, we will throw him down the hill. We must relish life, as the great Bhargava has said,' replied Balarama, quoting high authority.

'Relish life by all means — not by wasting it, but by fully living it to a purpose,' Krishna reminded him with an indulgent smile.

'I have decided to live it fully,' said Balarama, stretching himself out under a tree.

Krishna left Balarama to his devices but never failed to associate himself with the life of the Garudas. Vainateya, the young Garuda prince, who had now recovered the use of his legs, followed Krishna like his shadow, placing himself at his disposal with worshipful loyalty. And the whole tribe of the Garudas, led by his father, the grateful Chief, came to look upon Krishna with awe and devotion as a guardian god, because he had lifted the curse which had been laid upon their future chief.

Aided by the young Garuda, Krishna went all over the Gomantaka Hill. He traced every path ; he eyed the unscalable slopes for possible ways of climbing them. He scrutinised every rock which could possibly afford an obstacle to the invader when he came. He also discovered how rich the Hill was in food and water — and above all, in minerals from which weapons could be made.

In his leisure moments Krishna also thought of men and things ; how men could be won over to Dharma ; how life could be lived with relish but without being emasculated by fear, anger or satiety.

Sometimes he thought of Nanda and Yashoda, of Radha and her companions, of Vasudeva and Devaki, of the Five Brothers ; and of how all of them were woven into his life, which the sweet association with them had enriched. Sometimes he thought of Asika and of the fate she might have met with at the hands of the Divine Mother. His mind now and then conjured up the beautiful princess of Vidarbha, who had so nobly befriended him. Often his mind went back to the problem of Jarasandha, that ambitious monarch, who, by force and fraud, had overshadowed the fate of kings and peoples. And he felt how, step by step, he was being led to meet the challenge of this king.

Constantly his heart went out to Uddhava, that inestimable friend, who rarely spoke but invariably carried out his slightest wish ; who, in fact, lived so that he, Krishna, might fulfil himself. Often he wondered what he might be doing, attempting, as he must be, to break through the net which the Emperor of Magadha was spreading around Krishna.

In spite of all these preoccupations, Krishna never failed to join the Garudas in their dances and festivities and to abandon himself fully to these. He taught the young men how to play the flute, and the maidens how to dance the *rasa*. And he was at hand whenever there was a quarrel to make up or a difficulty to be solved. And in return he was adored by the simple-hearted folks of Gomantaka.

Krishna's great concern was to arm himself with weapons. The wars of the day were mostly decided by individual combats between expert warriors, each armed with his favourite weapons, prepared by each one for himself. The art of making special weapons was, therefore, part of a laborious training which Krishna had already acquired in Sandipani's *ashram*. So he bent himself to prepare a mighty bow, a mace of unequalled efficacy, and if possible his favourite weapon, the *chakra* or discus, which would make him invincible.

The Garuda Chief bore the name of Arteya, derived from that of his mother Arta. He was looked upon by his tribe as possessing miraculous powers. He was the favourite of the Fire God, his guardian deity, and it was said that, whenever he worshipped the sacred fire with the appropriate incantations, the god would convert stones into streams of dark red metal. This metal was used by him for making arrow-heads for himself and members of his family. The other Garudas used only flint-tipped arrows and flint hatchets in tribal warfare.

Krishna soon established himself on terms of intimacy with the Chief, because he also knew the magic by which the fiery molten metal could be liberated by the Fire God from the stones sacred to him. With the Chief's permission, he also began to teach the youngsters of the tribe how to make better bows and arrows with flint heads and how to sling at high-flying birds. Soon these youngsters, under the leadership of Vainateya, became an orgnised group of devoted followers, trying to excel one another in jumping, climbing and running. And now, at Krishna's request, the Chief, who considered him a great favourite of the Fire

God, agreed that he should teach the art of extracting copper to Vainateya and his companions.

Krishna was not satisfied with the kind of weapons which he and the Chief were making by the favour of the Fire God. He, therefore, selected a sequestered spot and, with the help of young Garuda, set up a big sacrificial altar for his own worship. And whenever with appropriate Vedic *mantras* he offered sacred stones and other offerings to Agni, the Fire God was pleased to release a flaming stream of metal.

Also with the aid of young Garuda, he forged for himself out of this metal a sword, arrow tips, a discus and the sharp-edged crest and handle of the mace. But try as he would, he could not make these weapons more powerful than those he had been taught to forge in the *ashram* of Guru Sandipani.

Krishna pondered over the problem long and ceaselessly. If the mission of his life was to establish Dharma, he had to fight against *adharma* which never set any limit to violence. This he could only do if he achieved the impossible — the power to control violence by love wherever he could, by force wherever he must. Day and night, therefore, he prayed to the Fire God, and even to Indra, the god with whom he had fought in the days of his boyhood at Vrindavan and won, to come to his assistance and send him arms of irresistible potency.

One night he sat watching the sacred fire burning and crackling on the altar, when he saw, as usual, a fiery stream of copper being released by the god. As he diverted it into a narrow gully which young Garuda kept filled with water, he felt highly dissatisfied.

For long he continued to invoke the gods to send him superhuman arms, offering fresh fuel and coconut oil at the altar. Suddenly, his eye caught sight of something miraculous. One of the rocks, which had not melted with the others, began to glow like the sun, fiery as at midday, golden red as at dawn. It was a strange sight. It was a sign from the gods, thought Krishna. The other rocks had

already melted freely, but not this glowing, fiery ball of light and heat.

He continued to invoke the gods and to pour his offerings into the fire. The flames leapt up from the altar. A stream trickled out of the glowing ball. When diverted into the gully, it sizzled frantically, a fiery steam issuing from it.

When the molten liquid became cool, Krishna picked it up and was delighted that the gods had answered his invocation. He flung it at the copper blade of the sword ; the blade broke into two. He shot copper arrow-tips against it ; their edges were blunted. At last Indra had sent him a piece of his thunderbolt, heavy and unbreakable.

Krishna then discovered that the little red rocks, so rare on the Hill, which the Chief Arteya threw away as useless, were the favoured offerings of the Fire God, for when they were offered the fiery liquid which came from the altar became pieces of thunderbolt.

Krishna and Garuda made a search for such reddish rocks all over the hill. When they were found in sufficient quantities, they were offered to the sacrificial fire. Though the Fire God was difficult to please, Krishna satisfied him with copious offerings of coconut oil and sandalwood. Then the fire blazed high. The flames leapt up. The red rocks glowed red. A stream of molten liquid flowed out. Cooled and tempered, hammered and sharpened, the thunderbolt emerged as a shining weapon — a weapon which could easily break copper and flint weapons. It was the gift of the gods.

Balarama opened his eyes, now that he had his afternoon sleep, as a fragrance came floating in the air. He breathed it in. It was sweet and pungent and exciting. He sat up. He filled his lungs with the sweet-smelling air and sighed. He felt happier than ever before.

The fragrance was overpowering. He had never smelt it before. He got up and began to walk towards the spot from which the smell came. He saw a wondrous thing. A kind of milk was oozing out of the trunk of a tree,

emitting fragrance. He was surprised that a tree could discharge such a fragrant drink.

He went up to the tree, joined his palms, collected the milk in them and tasted it. It was delicious, unlike anything he had tasted before. He took some more of it and yet more. And soon his doubts became clear. A lightness descended upon him. He looked at the sky ; it was beautiful. He looked at the trees and creepers and found them lovelier than he had ever found them. He felt like dancing, not on the ground, but in the air.

Then he took some more of the drink and still more, till he was full. And he found the earth dancing under him. His eyes also began to roam over the earth and the sky. He felt like embracing everybody, even the Garuda girls. He suddenly liked their dark, dainty forms, so much of which were exposed to the gaze.

He went towards the hut where Krishna was fabricating a mace for himself. 'Poor boy!' thought Balarama. 'He is working hard. It is a very bad habit of his. He does not enjoy life as it should be enjoyed. He needs that nectar-like milk to make him gay. I will bring him some tomorrow.'

'Krishna, wh-wh-what are you wasting your time for?' asked Balarama in faltering words.

'And, Brother, what have you been doing with yourself?' asked Krishna in surprise.

'I ..... Oh! I have discovered "nectar." It comes out of the trees in Gomantaka. Come, have a drink,' said Balarama, rolling his eyes.

Krishna understood the state in which Balarama was, but was loth to wound his pride.

'I am perfecting my mace. When are you starting yours?' asked Krishna.

'Mace! What do I want a mace for?' asked Balarama.

'How will you fight Jarasandha?' asked Krishna.

'How?' asked Balarama, shocked that his brother was

so ignorant of such an obvious thing. 'I don't need a mace.'

Then he looked round and saw a field being ploughed. With unsteady steps, he walked up to the spot and, to the surprise of the Garuda who was driving the bullocks, unyoked them. He took the plough which four men would have found it difficult to lift and carried it on his shoulder like a mace.

'Krishna, I don't need to make a mace. I will fight Jarasandha with this. Let him face me if he dares!' said the young giant, throwing down the plough and laughing uproariously as his legs collapsed under him and he laid himself down to sleep.

One day, Krishna, led by young Garuda, climbed down the Hill on the side where it was washed by the sea. There he discovered something which opened for him the prospect of making Gomantaka still more invulnerable if occasion arose.

Ages ago, evidently, Gomantaka had been a sea-girt hill. Then some ingenious ancestors of the Garudas had found difficulty in crossing over to the mainland at high tide. They had, therefore, built dams of unhewn stone to keep back the sea on both sides. The Hill, in consequence, had become a part of the mainland. Krishna could still see the depression round the foot of the Hill which had once been covered with sea water, thus making an island of Gomantaka.

When Krishna and Garuda returned to the top of the Hill, they came across Balarama enjoying himself in a grove, surrounded by three maidens. The young giant had stretched himself on the ground, his back against a tree. One young woman was holding a pot of 'nectar' for him to drink, the other was weaving a garland for him, and the third was rubbing the soles of his feet.

Balarama saw Krishna and Garuda, and called them. 'Krishna, I have three *apsaras* — divine dancers — to look after me. One I have named Varuni; she gives me nectar. The other is Kanti, who looks after the way I adorn my-

self. The third is Shri, who looks after my comforts. Brother, you are just wasting your time here, getting ready for a fight. Jarasandha is not going to come.'

Krishna laughed. 'I hope Jarasandha will come soon. If you live like this, you will soon become incapable of fighting him.'

'Whenever he comes, I will be ready for him,' said Balarama and turned to his fair companions. And the young women giggled.

Young Garuda, the Chief's son, often used to go to Karavirapura. Fleet-footed, he, with his eagle mask, would run there and back in two days' time. Once he returned from Karavirapura and came straight to Krishna.

'Lord, I have great news for you,' he said.

'What is it, Garuda?' asked Krishna. Now he could talk to young Garuda in his own language, and Garuda could also speak the language of the Gods.

'Shrigalava, the King of Karavirapura, is going to receive a guest, some great king, in a few days' time. Preparations of all kinds are being made,' said Garuda.

'What is the name of the great king?' asked Krishna.

'I have forgotten,' replied Garuda.

'Is it Jarasandha, by any chance?' asked Krishna.

'Yes, that is it. He is coming with other kings. Shrigalava has invited them,' said Garuda.

'Well, then we must be ready,' said Krishna.

When Balarama heard the news, full of 'nectar' though he was, he shook off his companions and strode into the hut.

'Krishna, where are the arms you have made? Jarasandha is coming,' said Balarama.

Krishna took him to a separate hut and showed him the bow and arrows and the mace which he had fashioned for himself.

'We must worship them and name them,' said Balarama.

'I am quite ready. But where are yours?' asked Krishna.

'They will be ready by the time we worship, the day after tomorrow,' Balarama said and rolled his eyes which were almost blood-shot with 'nectar'-bibbing.

Balarama went to where the young women were waiting for him, drove them away with a roar, took an axe and began felling a large tree. Then he fashioned a mace for himself out of its trunk, working throughout the whole of two days, and replenishing his strength now and again with the 'nectar.'

Then a ceremony was performed to which the whole tribe of the Garudas was invited.

'Now begin worshipping your weapons, Krishna,' Balarama said.

'But where are your arms, Brother?' asked Krishna.

'I will bring them as soon as you begin your worshipping,' replied Balarama.

And in a few minutes, Balarama returned, a big plough on the shoulder, a five-foot high pestle on the other.

'You wanted weapons. Here are my weapons. I don't need to slave for them for days like you. Now start your worshipping,' said Balarama.

Krishna smiled. 'They are mighty weapons indeed. I would like you to see the third one which I have made,' he said and lifted a heap of fresh leaves to disclose a *chakra* — discus — shining like the midday sun with a hundred tiny, razor-sharp spikes on its rim.

Krishna also lifted dried palm leaves to disclose the helmets, breast-plates, greaves and other equipment which the Garudas, under his direction, had prepared for them. Among them there was a golden crown scintillating with gems.

'I prepared this for the lord,' said the young Garuda proudly.

Balarama opened his eyes in surprise. 'It is wonderful. Now let us name the weapons,' he said.

And so Balarama's plough was named *Samvartaka,* and the pestle *Saunanda.* Krishna's bow was named *Sharnga,* the mace *Kaumodaki,* and the *chakra* (discus) *Sudarshana* — names destined to resound through time.

And they worshipped them and invoked in them the strength of the gods.

'And Garuda, my friend, shall be the guardian of my arms.' He shall always bear my standard, and whenever he is not present, my standard shall bear his image,' said Krishna. 'For he helped me to make these weapons.'

'Now, let Jarasandha come,' said Balarama.

And the Eagle-faces danced with joy round the brothers. Then they showered flowers on them and, in a spirit of defiance to all their enemies, played on their war drums.

18

BALARAMA'S PLOUGH

Jarasandha came. His principal allies, among them Damaghosha, Rukmi, Anuvinda, Dantavakra and Darada, came with him too — kings whom he was too astute to leave behind him. With them were select warriors from different kingdoms.

The adventure was in the nature of a gay hunting party, with the set purpose of killing the quarry. As the party pushed forward through the friendly and hospitable kingdoms of Usinara, Chedi and Vidarbha, the kings or princes of which had joined it, the evenings were spent in enjoying food and drink, in exhilarating, boastful talk, and in burning incense to the might of the Magadhan emperor.

It had been a triumphant march. Everywhere he was welcomed, honoured and his 'victory' acclaimed by the crowds. He knew for certain — as Shrigalava Vasudeva of Karavirapura had assured him in advance — that the two sons of Vasudeva had hidden themselves on a solitary hill in the midst of a dense forest. It would be child's play to capture them and set an example to all those who defied his power.

However, the journey from Vidarbha through jungle tracks and over high mountains proved a tiring one. It was difficult to replenish the stock of food and drink and the mountainous terrain made progress difficult. The patience of each one of the princes, who formed the hunting party, was coming to an end. Some of them, between themselves, even began to question the wisdom of undergoing all this discomfort to hunt out two young men who were living in

an inaccessible forest, already lost to the world. But Jarasandha was unrelenting and they had to submit to his wishes.

Jarasandha and his friends camped at the foot of the Gomantaka Hill, hoping to complete the adventure in a couple of days. But the next day, as they studied the steep, unscalable slopes of the Hill, their hopes turned to doubts. How long could the siege take? And if there were water and fruits in plenty on the Hill top, would it ever surrender?

Attempts were made to find out a way to climb the Hill. One narrow, tortuous path, where barely two persons could climb abreast, wound itself to the top, crossing pointed rocks and fringing deep ravines. Some adventurous spirits decided to reconnoitre and began to climb the Hill. They had only gone a little way when those in the camp saw some men coming to the edge of the plateau at the top and pushing boulders over, which hurtled down the path. The rocks rolled on, hit the climbers and carried them into the ravine below.

As things were, two men on the Hill could defy a whole army for days, and there appeared to be quite a few hundred on the top.

For two more days Jarasandha held a council of war. His allies had lost their zest for an unrewarding hunt. They were tired by the arduous journey. The supply line to the camp from Karavirapura was far from easy. There was little chance of the Hill being captured or a siege, however long, being successful.

Jarasandha saw that his friends had lost heart. But he did not want his enemies to escape. He told them of what the world would say if they ran away before two young men. He humoured, cajoled and exhorted them, even gave indirect threats. But the kings, who had joined him in the hunt, declined to risk an attack on the Hill.

Of all the members of the party, Damaghosha, the King of Chedi, was the only one who was cool and collected. He enjoyed the discomfiture of his friends, for he had joined this adventure for a different motive.

When he had been vanquished by Jarasandha, he had had to accept the position of a subordinate ally. After he had entered into the alliance, the Emperor had come to his help on more than one occasion and saved him from disaster. However, he was clear-sighted enough to see how the growing power of Jarasandha was a menace, not only to kings like him, but even to the whole way of Aryan life. Where his ambition or success was involved, the Emperor had no inhibitions. Some day, the King of Chedi feared, if fortune continued to favour him, he would try to smash the great kingdoms of Panchala and Hastinapura, subjugating the whole Aryavarta and leaving no hope of independence for any other king.

Inspired by this fear, Damaghosha was always thinking of bringing some balance of power into existence, which would impose a restraint upon Jarasandha. Then had come the death of Kamsa as the first blow to the uninterrupted growth of Magadhan hegemony. When Krishna and Balarama had risen to the leadership of Mathura, Damaghosha had begun to entertain the hope that they might be able to establish a counter-balancing power.

Things, however, had proved otherwise. The two promising young men were now on the run, and his main object in joining the hunt, apart from not incurring the displeasure of the Emperor, was to wait for some opportunity of saving their lives. The opportunity which he was waiting for seemed to present itself now.

When everyone was at his wit's end, he intervened, making a suggestion as to how to find a way out of the impasse.

'Let us not give up our purpose, noble kings. If we do so, we will expose ourselves to ridicule. The honour which our King of kings enjoys will be tarnished. We must find a way out,' he said.

Jarasandha had always looked upon Damaghosha with suspicion. He knew that though in the past he had thrown the cloak of his protection over Chedi and often saved Damaghosha from disaster, the loyalty the latter professed

could not be taken at its face value. Chediraj was always correct in his behaviour; his cleverness was unfathomable; it was never possible to see the working of his mind. He, Jarasandha, had also sensed that, as the husband of Vasudeva's sister, Damaghosha had more than a lurking sympathy for Krishna and Balarama. Jarasandha would have preferred to have his son, Shishupala, join this party. But Damaghosha had readily agreed to join this adventure and there was no way of getting rid of him without creating an open rift in the alliance. He was a highly-respected prince and his defection might cause incalculable harm at a crisis when his own imperial power was threatened by the unavenged assassination of Kamsa.

When Damaghosha intervened, offering to make a suggestion, everyone turned to him with curiosity.

'What is the way?' asked Jarasandha.

'We know that we cannot reduce the Hill by a frontal attack,' said Damaghosha. 'We also cannot wait for long in this beast-ridden jungle. At the same time we cannot go back without achieving our purpose in some way. If we do so, we will be the laughing-stock of the whole earth and the fame of the Chakravarti, which shines bright all over the world, will be dimmed.'

'But what is the way that you suggest?' asked Rukmi.

'I have a suggestion to make,' said Damaghosha. 'It is summer now. The slopes of the Hill, right up to the top, are covered with dry grass. Let us set fire to it tonight on all sides. By tomorrow, the forest on the top will have caught fire and destroyed everyone there. Then we can claim that we have secured our purpose and can return in triumph. And the Vaasudevas, even if they are not burnt to death, will never be able to show their faces to the world.'

Jarasandha considered the suggestion for a while to discover whether there was any drawback to it. The other kings saw a way out of their difficulties, and promptly accepted the suggestion. Jarasandha had no choice but to agree.

Krishna was awakened by a screech from young Garuda. 'What is the matter?' he asked, sitting up.

'They have set fire to the grass on the slopes. We will be burnt to death,' said Garuda.

Led by Garuda, Krishna and Balarama who had also woken up in the meanwhile, rushed to the edge of the plateau. They were soon joined by Arteya, the Chief.

A strong breeze was blowing and the approaches to the Hill were enveloped in a rapidly devouring conflagration. Cries of distress arose from the Garudas as they saw the dried grass on the slopes catching fire and lighting up the dark moonless night with its leaping flames. The Chief fell at Krishna's feet, praying for mercy, since he believed Krishna to have miraculous power. 'Oh, Krishna, save us. If the fire reaches the top, we will be burnt to death.'

'Come with me, all of you, men and women. Light your torches. Take whatever you have — clubs, maces, ploughs, whatever is handy. We will quench the fire. I will show you how,' said Krishna and added: 'Balarama, let us put on our armour and take up our arms.' As cool as ever, he was now issuing instructions in a voice of command. 'Vainateya, lead us to the path by which we reached the sea the other day.'

Led by young Garuda and Krishna, all ran down the zigzag path in the rear part of the Hill, leading to the sea, which was roaring beneath them at high tide, because it was the night of the month on which there was no moon.

Krishna led them to what looked like two ridges but which, ages ago, were man-made dams. A little scraping uncovered the walls of unhewn stones. Everyone, under Krishna's direction, applied himself to forcing a breach in one of the dams.

At last a breach was made in the dam and the sea rushed in. Then they all ran to the other side of the Hill. A breach was made in the other dam also and the water rushed into the moat-like depression which surrounded the Hill. Before the dam disappeared, Krishna and Balarama, with the highly-trained young Garuda, had crossed it.

Jarasandha, his allies and their soldiers were jubilant

when the conflagration, which they had lighted, began to spread round the base of Gomantaka.

For a time they enjoyed the sight of hares, deers and bears rushing out of the thickets for fear of the approaching fire. Then they dined heartily, for the next day offered the prospect of an early departure from this beast-infested wood, and went to sleep.

It was past midnight when the hiss and roar of rushing waters woke them. They rubbed their eyes and looked on helplessly as the base of the Hill was girdled from both sides by torrents of sea water, quenching the fire. A panic seized them. No one said a word, though all felt that the son of Vasudeva, who was reputed to possess miraculous powers, had done this. Jarasandha's brow was clouded. His enemy seemed to be a demon.

The morning star shone bright on the horizon. Above the noise of the torrent, they heard what sounded like the long, weird screeches of angry eagles. And before they realised what was happening, a giant form, wielding a mighty weapon looking like a plough and followed by lithe forms uttering terrifying screeches, was upon them. Bowmen and servitors ran for their lives ; chariots crashed under the heavy blows of the giant's plough. Horses, wildly neighing with fright, broke loose and galloped away into the forest.

Before Jarasandha and his friends could collect their arms, from the other side came the blows of a mace, deftly wielded by an expert hand, every blow crashing a skull. The screeches of eagles continued to be heard, now rising in fearful clamour, now trailing off into ghastly wails. And darkness was still over them all.

Jarasandha, his allies and his men were thrown into utter confusion.

When the eastern horizon was tinted by the rising dawn, the dazed kings and their men saw in their midst the giant, Balarama, spreading terror and destruction with a plough.

And on a rock on the other side stood Krishna, now

stringing a mighty bow. Every arrow sped from it with unerring precision and claimed its victim.

Rukmi, from a distance, recognised Krishna and pointed him out to his friends. 'There is Krishna. Let us make for him.' Anuvinda of Avanti took up his bow and arrow, and stepped in front of the others. Prince Gonard took hold of his mace and made a dash for the rock on which Krishna stood.

Krishna handed his bow to young Garuda, who, with some of his companions, stood behind him, and took the *Sudarshana Chakra* in his hand. The discus slipped from his agile fingers. Whirling, it sped like a flash of lightning and slit the throat of Gonard ; still revolving with unabated speed, it returned to Krishna's hands. The effect on those on both sides was overwhelming ; though some of Krishna's friends had seen the miraculous discus before, none realised that it could be used with such effect.

Anuvinda was stringing an arrow to his bow when Krishna spoke to him in a friendly voice. 'Anuvinda, we are brothers, both pupils of Guru Sandipani. We can't fight each other.' And again the discus sped, whirling on; circled over the head of Anuvinda and returned to Krishna's hand. The bow dropped from Anuvinda's nerveless hand.

Rukmi sprang forward, bow and arrow in hand, and took aim. The *chakra* flashed; the arrow, intercepted, fell in pieces.

'Go back, Kaishika's grandson,' said Krishna. And again snatching the mace from Garuda's hands, he jumped down from the rock and rushed at those who wanted to attack him.

At that moment a conch sounded, just a few paces away from where Krishna stood. He heard the rich notes of *Panchajanya.* His conch was there ! And as the sun rose, Uddhava, with whom he had left it, could be seen blowing it as he stood in the chariot of Damaghosha, which was rooted motionless to one spot, its horses having bolted.

As the sun rose, the allied kings saw the weird-looking, walking eagles with flint arrows and hatchets rushing for-

ward with wild screeches towards the bowmen and servitors of their party who were hiding behind trees and bushes.

Damaghosha was watching the fray from his chariot. Now that it was light, he could see what a miracle the Vaasudeva brothers had worked. The bowmen, servitors and footmen had run away; the horses had fled. Krishna and Balarama were wielding weapons of miraculous power, such as had never been seen before. This was the chance which he had been waiting for. He jumped down from the chariot, gathered his Chedi warriors and rushed between Rukmi and Krishna, with joyous shouts of 'Jaya Vaasudeva, Jaya Vaasudeva.' Uddhava, with his weapon in his hand, followed Damaghosha and stood by the side of Krishna.

On the other side Balarama, intoxicated by his own valour, had dashed into the very midst of Jarasandha's men. Nothing could withstand the might of *Samvartaka,* his terrible plough.

King Darada rushed forward with his mace, trying to hit Balarama on the side. Balarama turned round; *Samvartaka* descended like a thunderbolt; Darada lay on the ground, his head smashed.

'Where are you, Jarasandha? I have come for you! Come on, Jarasandha,' rose the stentorian voice of the giant.

Everyone heard the challenge — so did Jarasandha. Among warriors of that rank, the etiquette of war was inexorable; once challenged the warrior of repute had to accept. Jarasandha took his heavy mace and came forward.

Balarama handed *Samvartaka* to the waiting Garudas, took his mace from them and attacked Jarasandha.

The two combatants were well matched. If one was tall, the other was sturdy. Furiously, the combat continued, all the others round them standing still to watch it. It would have been a disgrace if so renowned a warrior as Jarasandha had been helped by other warriors. Yet, if he died, an empire would collapse.

Soon Jarasandha felt the crushing weight of the arms of his antagonist. The folly of such a reckless adventure as he had undertaken flashed into his mind. If he was

killed by this young man, all his achievements and hopes would have shrunk to a ludicrous tale. He tried to look round for some escape. But before he could find a way, a shattering blow came from Balarama and his own mace fell away from his hand.

Suddenly, *Panchajanya* sounded the note of victory. The bystanders parted. Krishna, Damaghosha and his men, with Uddhava at their head, drew near the combatants. A hush fell on those standing there.

'Brother, stay your hand. His time has still to come,' said Krishna, arresting Balarama's arm ready to bring down the mace on Jarasandha's head.

Jarasandha saw Balarama's threatening arm arrested, and stood in such awe as he had never felt in his life. He had heard of Krishna, but had never seen him before. Now he felt the Presence — the graceful body, the face of charm and dignity, the eyes flashing an irresistible smile of triumph, all enveloped in a halo of light — and shrank away.

'Anuvinda, take the Chakravarti in your chariot. He is not well,' said Krishna.

Jarasandha felt more humiliated than ever before. He, the great conqueror, was given the gift of his life by this young cowherd, the person he most hated. A fury raged in his heart. But he felt impotent. He hurriedly climbed into Anuvinda's chariot; some straying horses were caught and yoked to it, and the emperor was rapidly borne away.

And young Garuda, in wild ecstasy, let out a screech so full of triumph that it echoed along the slopes of Gomantaka.

19

UDDHAVA IN 'HELL'

When Krishna left Kundinapura, Uddhava felt that his heart had also left him, to keep company with his beloved friend. In his infancy, his father, Devabhaga, the brother of Vasudeva, had sent him to Vrindavan to be brought up with Krishna and, to him, his cousin was both a passionately-loved hero and his better self. Since then he had lived for Krishna and thriven only in his company. His supreme privilege was to serve his hero unobtrusively, to fulfil his slightest wish and to help him to accomplish all his purposes. His thought processes had also been fused with Krishna's, to such an extent that often he would anticipate his friend's wishes and immediately take steps to fulfil them.

So, when Krishna left for the Sahya Mountains, he bent all his energies towards helping him come back in triumph. Living as the guest of old Kaishika, the father of King Bhishmaka of Vidarbha, he could see that Princess Rukmini had felt heart-broken when Krishna went away to seek an asylum in the wilderness. In her, therefore, he found a fiery spirit which was impatient to help him in his work. She mentioned Uddhava's plans to her grandfather Kaishika, and the three of them spent a considerable time in devising ways to frustrate the aims of Jarasandha. They thought that, whatever plan they decided on, the astute Damaghosha, King of Chedi, ought to be its pivot.

What Krishna had anticipated had come to pass. Jarasandha had no desire to destroy Mathura merely for his own amusement. Vasudeva's sons had offered him a mortal affront ; they had almost shattered his reputation for invincibility ; they had stood in the way of his ambi-

tion. The first step in his strategy, therefore, was that they should be hunted out like rabid dogs and killed. It would then be easy for the Emperor to instal his widowed daughters in Mathura as dowager queens with some infant Yadava placed on the throne.

With the blessing of Kaishika, Uddhava, in disguise, went to Chedi and secretly presented himself before Damaghosha, at the time when Jarasandha and his friends had halted in his capital on their way to the Sahya Mountains. Damaghosha listened quietly as Uddhava spent his ingenuity and eloquence on bringing him into the plan, and then thought over the suggestion carefully. It would be unwise, he concluded, to let go an opportunity of shaking the foundation of Jarasandha's hold over his allies, if Vasudeva's sons were as valiant as was reported. He therefore left with Jarasandha's party for the Sahya Mountains, accompanied by Uddhava in the disguise of a charioteer.

Things had turned out better than Damaghosha had imagined. He had helped to stop the fight and saved the life of the Emperor, and also seen with undiluted satisfaction his inglorious discomfiture. When, therefore, Jarasandha's friends had hastily departed with him, Damaghosha embraced Krishna and Balarama heartily and told them of all that had happened. With a smile of appreciation he also narrated how Uddhava had persuaded him to give his help.

'Everyone wanted to go back when they found Gomantaka unscalable,' he added. 'Jarasandha, however, would not agree to the suggestion. The only way to make him happy was to set fire to the Hill, so that he could retire without losing face. So I advised him to do so. I was positive that the fire would never reach the top.'

'Well, we did not let it reach the summit,' said Krishna with a smile.

'Krishna, are you really what everyone says you are —a god?' asked the King. 'You have commanded the sea and it has obeyed. And between the two of you, you

have annihilated the prestige of the greatest of our kings. And .....,' he added with a twinkle in his shrewd eye, 'he will never be able to live down the ridicule to which you have exposed him.' Damaghosha laughed aloud at what he thought was a huge joke. 'This victor of a hundred battles running for his very life before two boys! And together with his loyal allies! I never hoped to see such a happy day!'

In the meantime, the Garudas who had gone in pursuit of Jarasandha's bowmen returned with a few captives, the rest of them having fled. They were overjoyed when they saw the triumph achieved by Krishna and Balarama and by their screeches conveyed the message of victory to their kinsmen who were watching from the top of the Hill. Immediately the Garudas, men and women, led by their Chief, came down the Hill and surrounded Krishna, Balarama and Damaghosha with shouts of wild ecstasy, and offered flowers, fruits and food to them all, after breaking a hundred coconuts to ward off evil. They had also brought along 'nectar' for Balarama which the young giant took till his eyes rolled and his legs refused to stand. Damaghosha too was not slow to refresh himself with it.

After a heavy repast, in which the Garudas also joined, they, both men and women, celebrated the victory by a ceremonial dance in which Krishna and Balarama took part as well. They were as merry when dancing as only the Garudas could be.

For two days Damaghosha and his party camped at the foot of the Hill enjoying the hospitality of the Garudas. The King of Chedi who had heard so much about Krishna was amazed to find such ripe wisdom and uncanny perception in his young relative and was very glad that in the big game that he was playing to counteract the growing influence of Jarasandha, he had now found someone whose power to work miracles appeared unlimited.

On the third day Krishna sent Uddhava to Karavirapura with a message to Shrigalava that he and Balarama — now that they were here — would like to pay their res-

pects to the great Yadava Prince. Balarama disagreed with this friendly overture.

'Krishna, I don't want you to send so courteous a message; the fellow is behaving like a blackguard; he betrayed us to Jarasandha,' said Balarama. 'If you want to meet him, do so yourself; I will not come.'

'We do not lose anything by being courteous at all times,' replied Krishna. 'And we ought not to lose an opportunity to make Shrigalava a friend. Who knows? — he may be a good man at heart.'

'You may go on making as many friends as you like,' said Balarama. 'I won't have anything to do with such a wicked man. You remember how the mighty Bhargava told us that Shrigalava was an enemy of Dharma and had kept several venerable Acharyas in Karavirapura in prison for not accepting him as Vaasudeva, the Great God.'

'Perhaps the Great God may confer a favour on me by releasing those Acharyas!' said Krishna. 'I do not like to desert such venerable masters of the Vedic lore,' he added firmly.

Uddhava rode to Karavirapura, accompanied by Vainateya and other fleet-footed Garudas who often ran ahead of the horse. Four warriors of Chedi also followed them on foot.

When Uddhava reached the fort, they were stopped by the guards from entering it. The guards were dark-skinned men dressed in loin-cloths and huge necklaces and armlets of silver, each bearing a heavy wooden club and a copper lance. When informed by Garuda of Uddhava's mission, their chief, who carried a shield of silver, went inside the fort to obtain instructions. After a considerable time, he returned with orders. Only Uddhava was to be allowed to enter the town, escorted by a fair-skinned officer, who spoke the sacred language.

Uddhava, once he entered the fort, was asked to dismount and give up his arms. Then he was led on foot towards the palace which was more a citadel than a royal residence. On the way, he met dark-skinned men and

women, the men in loin-cloths, the women in short saris, all loaded with rich ornaments of gold and silver. The markets too were full of gold and silver trinkets. Rich sweets were on sale everywhere. Uddhava could not have believed that Karavirapura was rolling in such riches, had he not seen it with his own eyes.

The citadel had all the signs of having been prepared for some festival. The officer explained to Uddhava that these preparations were made to welcome Jarasandha, the King of Magadha, who was coming to pay his respects to 'the great lord.' Uddhava smiled. People in Karavirapura evidently did not know that the preparations were wasted ; Jarasandha was on his way home.

As Uddhava entered the citadel, he saw a large crowd drawing a huge, open, four-wheeled chariot. A short thick-set person with a well-combed beard, decked in gold and with a cubit-high diadem on his head, sat on a throne of gold placed on it, the jewels in his diadem, necklaces, waist-band and armlets flashing like living eyes in the sunshine. He also wore on his left shoulder a huge bow. Uddhava could easily see that it could be none other than Shrigalava himself.

The crowds, in their own language, were shouting word formulas which implied worship, and, as the chariot was drawn out of the citadel, the townsmen on both sides fell prostrate on their faces in homage.

'Is this your king?' asked Uddhava.

'Not our king. He is Lord Vaasudeva,[1] the Great God in person,' said the officer with appropriate reverence.

'He is not the son of Vasudeva, but Vaasudeva, the Great God, is he?' asked Uddhava with a smile.

'You are a foreigner, so naturally you don't know anything about us,' said the officer. 'According to us, Vaasudeva is the Great God, and he is the master of us all.' So saying he touched his eyelids with his forefinger to show reverence.

In the meantime, the procession came near to where they stood and the officer fell prostrate before the King as the chariot passed by. Uddhava, not to give offence, did likewise. Shrigalava glanced loftily at Uddhava, and the procession went on its way.

Uddhava was then taken to a stone rest-house intended for distinguished guests, where the officer looked after his needs, but was obstinately unresponsive and Uddhava's curiosity about Shrigalava remained unsatisfied.

Next morning he was sent for by the King. When Uddhava entered the compound of the stone palace, he found King Shrigalava seated on the same throne in the same pose, as immovable as the image of a god, shining in gold and jewels. By his side stood the queen, an emaciated frightened-looking woman, who evidently did not enjoy what was happening. She was supported by a young and very beautiful woman, whose eyes were fixed on Shrigalava in ecstatic veneration. Next to her stood a boy, evidently the Prince, who was more interested in looking furtively at his mother than at his father or the worshipping crowd.

A number of men and women were offering *arti*[2] to the King waving a hundred lights in front of him, and singing hymns evidently in his praise in a language which Uddhava did not understand. The throne was surrounded by women scantily clad but richly adorned and numerous fierce-looking men with heavy wooden clubs in their hands.

What shocked Uddhava most was that some Brahmans, who looked like Acharyas, stood all round the King offering obsequious worship. This was very different, he thought, from the respectful behaviour of the kings of Aryavarta towards the masters of high learning like Gargacharya and Sandipani, and it made him indignant.

When the ceremony of waving lights was over, and coconut cream, treacle and coriander seeds were distributed to all the persons present there as gifts from the divinity, Uddhava was taken by another officer up to the throne.

Uddhava offered due salutations to Shrigalava. The King stared at him for some time, making him feel uncomfortable. Then, smoothing his beard, he roared out a question, in the sacred language, which he spoke with an unfamiliar accent and mingled with strange words. 'Who are you, stranger? What is your name? And what favours do you seek from Lord Vaasudeva?'

'I am Uddhava, son of noble Devabhaga, the valiant Shoora of Mathura. I have come to ask no favours. I have come on behalf of my cousin, Krishna Vaasudeva,' said Uddhava.

'Krishna of Mathura? What have we, Vaasudeva, to do with him?' asked the King in a fierce, authoritative tone. 'We have nothing to do with him. We understand that this cowherd has killed his maternal uncle, the son-in-law of our friend, the lord of Magadha, and that he is hiding like a coward on the Gomantaka Hill. We are sure that by now our friend, the mighty Jarasandha, must have dispatched him to hell.'

'Oh great and noble King,'— began Uddhava.

'Who told you that we are a king?' angrily asked Shrigalava. 'There is only Lord VAASUDEVA here,' he said loftily and looked all round him, whilst everybody present folded their hands and bowed their heads in corroboration.

'Noble lord, forgive me. I am ignorant of the ways of Karavirapura,' Uddhava said meekly.

'Then you should not have come to our kingdom. What do you want of us?' asked Shrigalava.

'Krishna Vaasudeva would like to come to Karavirapura and pay his respects to its lord,' said Uddhava trying to humour the King.

'He must be dead by now,' Shrigalava said.

'My lord, he and his brother Balarama have already driven Jarasandha away, wounded Rukmi the Prince of Vidarbha, and killed King Darada,' said Uddhava.

Shrigalava glared at Uddhava as if he was out of his mind. 'You are telling lies,' at last he thundered. 'The lord of Magadha is coming here as our guest.'

'He is fleeing back to Magadha as fast as his horses can carry him,' Uddhava replied.

For a moment Shrigalava was silent. Then he said: 'Uddhava, go and tell your friend Krishna that we will permit him to see us only if he recognises us as VAASUDEVA, the Supreme Lord of the three worlds.'

Uddhava lost his patience. 'Krishna Vaasudeva....'

'Don't call him Vaasudeva! There is only one VAASUDEVA in the world and we are here,' said Shrigalava. Again he looked all round and the courtiers and the attendants folded their hands and bowed their heads in agreement, with quiet murmurs of approval.

Uddhava was tickled at this egregious vanity. Krishna, his friend, never called himself a god, but acted like one, while this pompous fool called himself a god and could not behave even like a man. 'How can he set his name aside? He is the son of Vasudeva, the lord of the Shooras of Mathura, and therefore Vaasudeva — and your kinsman, Best of Yadavas,' he added.

'There can't be two Vaasudevas in this world,' Shrigalava said firmly. 'If Krishna does not acknowledge us as the only God, VAASUDEVA, we will not see him.'

'I am afraid, there will have to be two Vaasudevas, O, great Vaasudeva,' said Uddhava with equal firmness.

'Yadava, you commit a sacrilege. You shall go to hell unless you acknowledge us as VAASUDEVA the Supreme God.'

'I will take leave of you, lord of Karavirapura. Krishna Vaasudeva does not claim to be a god as you do, but, to me, Krishna looks very much like one,' said Uddhava as he hurried to leave.

'You shall not utter such heresies in our presence,' said Shrigalava. 'Send him to hell,' he thundered and, with a sweep of his arm, ordered his men to take Uddhava into custody.

About twenty attendants, with lances in their hands, fell upon him, and binding him with ropes led him away from Shrigalava's presence.

Uddhava was forcibly carried to the far end of the citadel. At the moment he felt troubled about the fate of Krishna and Balarama if they fell into the hands of this wicked king ; his one anxiety, therefore, was how to warn Krishna of the danger. But situated as he was, he could do nothing. Parashurama, he knew, had already warned Krishna against the wiles of Shrigalava, but Uddhava could never have conceived him to be such a mixture of vanity and wickedness.

Uddhava was brought up to what looked like the mouth of a well, and unceremoniously flung into it. As he crept down the opening, however, he saw that it was not a well into which he was thrown, but the entrance to a large cave. He climbed down and saw the sunlight streaking in from a distant corner.

When he reached that corner, he discovered an opening leading down to a part of the valley which had been enclosed on two sides by high stone walls. He stepped into what looked like a veritable pit of hell, and saw a group of elderly men — whom he guessed to be the captive Acharyas — offering their *arghya* to the Sun God near a stream. He walked up to them and prostrated himself before them. With a silent gesture of their hands, they blessed him. All of the Acharyas, though reduced to skeletons, had high intelligent foreheads and eyes unnaturally bright.

'Uddhava !' came a familiar voice from behind.

Uddhava turned round to find Punardatta, the son of his Guru Sandipani, rushing towards him with open arms. Both embraced each other with heart-felt joy.

'How have you come to be here ?' asked Punardatta.

Uddhava explained to him how he had come to this 'hell' and inquired of Punardatta why he was there. Punardatta then told him all about himself.

There were ancient sects which worshipped VAASUDEVA as the Supreme Being. Galava *rishi,* who had come all the way to Karavirapura with the Yadava conquerors, belonged to this sect and had great influence with the ruling family. When a son was born to the young Yadava king of Karavirapura with his blessing, the infant was named Shrigalavala.

The young prince was brought up in the sect of Vaasudeva worshippers. When Galavacharya died, Shrigalava, then King of Karavirapura, disbanded his *ashram* and made himself the head of the sect. In course of time, by threats, bribes or persuasion, he made most of the people join the sect.

Later, when Shrigalava conquered the neighbouring tribes, he proclaimed himself VAASUDEVA, the God of gods, come to earth, and assumed all the insignia of godhood. He transformed the sect to suit his wishes, and enforced his own worship first by favours and afterwards by threats and penalties. His ways, thereupon, earned him the nickname Shrigal or the fox.

Some of the learned Acharyas of the town stood out against this enforced worship. They were prepared to give Shrigalava all the honours which the *Shastras* enjoined as due to a king, but not to recognise him as the God of gods. Among them was Punardatta's maternal grandfather, Rudracharya, an outstanding Acharya, who remained uncompromising in his loyalty to the gods to whom the divine *Vēdas* were addressed. Led by Rudracharya, many Acharyas refused to change their faith. Shrigalava, however, persuaded some Acharyas to offer him exclusive worship in return for rich rewards. Punardatta's grandfather, and those like him, who declined to compromise their independence, aroused the king's wrath against themselves. Those who had once looked on him with reverence had now ceased to be his supporters. As Rudracharya was the most respected of the unyielding Acharyas, Shrigalava decided to make an example of him and began to frighten all who associated with him. Even his pupils left him.

Three years before, Shrigalava had found himself powerful enough to disband Rudracharya's *ashram.* Then he took the next step. He persecuted all who were suspected of giving suport to the old man.

However, the old man, abandoned but unbent, stood unflinching in his resolve. One of his sons fled from Karavirapura. Another came to a compromise with Shrigalava. However, living on whatever he could obtain, Rudracharya refused to yield and followed his way of life strictly. He would not give up a single rite, nor depart from the ascetic rigour to which he was pledged. He would not attend the public worship which Shrigalava commanded him to attend.

'Then Shrigalava decided to wipe out all the learned *Acharyas* who would not accept him as the Great God, and prohibited them from following the rites of their faith,' continued Punardatta. 'My grandfather was the first to be sent to this "hell." Then, any of the *Acharyas* who refused to accept his godhood and join in worshipping him were sent here. They were seventeen in all, including my grandfather. Three of them have already died here. The rest are rotting as you see.'

'But why are you here?' asked Uddhava.

'On my return to Gurudeva, my father, we learnt what had befallen my grandfather. So I came to negotiate his release in the hope that Shrigalava would let my grandfather come with us. But he would not yield. On the contrary, he wanted me to join in worshipping him as the Supreme God. I declined and found myself in this hell. I am glad of it; I am now with my grandfather,' said Punardatta, with a wry smile. Then he added: 'I always seem to find my way into difficulties, and to meet you when the situation becomes hopeless.'

'We must find a way, as we did at Vaivasvatapuri,' said Uddhava.

20

SHVETAKETU'S FALL

When Uddhava was made known to Rudracharya and the other Acharyas by Punardatta, he told them of Krishna's exploits at Gomantaka. He also told Punardatta of his anxiety to get out of the 'hell' somehow and to warn Krishna of the dangers which awaited him if he persisted in his decision to meet Shrigalava. Punardatta informed him that the only outside contact which they had was when every fourth day an officer came to them to inquire whether they were prepared to accept Shrigalava as the God Vaasudeva. Thereupon, between the two of them, they thought out a plan of escape, and the next day when the officer was expected they waited for him on the floor of the cave.

Some time in the afternoon, two men, an officer and his assistant, were lowered into the cave in a basket. They climbed out of the basket and, groping in the semi-darkness, proceeded towards the opening which led to the valley. Uddhava threw himself on the officer, a flabby-looking youth ornamented with a gold necklace, and deprived him of his arms.

Punardatta also dealt in the same way with the assistant who, being an untrained man, was soon overpowered and beaten into unconsciousness. But the officer put up a resistance. He appeared to be a trained wrestler, closed his arms round Uddhava, and tried to throw him down. Soon both were rolling on the ground, arms interlocked.

Uddhava was Krishna's comrade and Sandipani's pupil, and easily parried the holds and tricks of the officer. But when the officer was on the point of being thrown on to the ground, he used a hold which surprised Uddhava greatly, because it was a special secret of his Guru Sandipani. He

knew the counter-trick well and countered the officer's hold successfully. 'The Sandipani trick, isn't it?' he could not help muttering.

'You are Sandipani's pupil?' asked the breathless officer. 'So am I.'

'God of all gods,' exclaimed Uddhava in surprise, 'is it Shvetaketu?'

'Uddhava!' exclaimed Shvetaketu, once the senior disciple of Sandipani, who had taught the *Vedas* to Krishna, Balarama and Uddhava in the Guru's walking school.

Both let go their hold of each other and became locked in an affectionate embrace. 'And this is Punardatta, Gurudeva's son, whom Krishna rescued from Vaivasvatapuri.' And all three laughed together and embraced each other again.

They left the unconscious assistant and came out into the valley.

'What has brought you both to this "hell?"' asked Shvetaketu.

'How do *you* happen to be here?' asked Punardatta. 'You were Gurudeva's favourite pupil when I was kidnapped from Prabhasa by Panchajana Rakshasa. But I did not see you in the *ashram* when Krishna brought me back. You, of all people in the world, in the service of Shrigalava! I have not seen you here before.'

'No. I was given this duty only today as some new man was sent to this "hell" yesterday. It must be one of you, for I was told that there were thirteen old men and two young men,' said Shvetaketu.

'It was I,' said Uddhava. 'But what a strange coincidence! We, your pupils, are rotting in this "hell" for Dharma with these saintly *Acharyas*—and you, our teacher and Gurudeva's favourite disciple, are our jailor and evidently living in luxury.'

'Have I changed so much?' asked Shvetaketu, looking down at his well-rounded body glittering with gold ornaments.

'Shvetaketu, brother, what has come over you — you, the most learned of us all, Krishna's beloved friend?' asked Uddhava.

'What has become of me? I am the same,' said Shvetaketu.

'Don't delude yourself. Where has your well-knit body gone? And where is your ascetic face, illumined by intelligence? But for your playing Gurudeva's trick, I should never have recognised you in this flabby, gold-studded, self-indulgent, *asuric* servant of a pompous king who claims to be the God of all gods!' said Uddhava in indignation.

'Don't talk like that. My assistant may regain consciousness and overhear you,' said Shvetaketu.

'Brother, have you fallen so low as to be afraid of speaking or hearing the truth?' asked Uddhava. Uddhava, usually self-controlled in speech, had been roused to righteous wrath at seeing the fall of his old comrade.

'First tell me all about both of you. Then I will tell you about myself,' said Shvetaketu.

'Our story is easily told. You were in Prabhasa with Gurudeva when I was there. Then Krishna and I left on the Punyajana ship to bring back Punardatta. Krishna behaved as the wonderful being I have always told you he was. Panchajana was sent to the bottom of the sea and we went in his ship to Vaivasvatapuri, where Punardatta had been kidnapped. Krishna overcame the magic power of the Divine Mother, the queen of Nagaloka, fought the king who was called the God of Death, and brought back Punardatta,' said Uddhava.

'Oh, wonderful! I knew Krishna would perform miracles. Then what happened?' asked Shvetaketu.

'We went to Mathura. There we learnt that Jarasandha had decided to invade our city to take revenge on Krishna and Balarama for killing Kamsa. We were too weak to resist Jarasandha. Krishna decided to seek asylum in the Sahya Mountains and so we left Mathura,' said Uddhava.

'And what next?' asked Shvetaketu.

'Then Krishna and Balarama sought a refuge on the Gomantaka Hill. Your Lord Vaasudeva, your God of all gods, betrayed them,' continued Uddhava sarcastically. 'Jarasandha and his allies came to Gomantaka Hill and set it on fire.'

'Oh, Lord VAASUDEVA!' said Shvetaketu, using the exclamation usual in Karavirapura.

'And listen, you devotee of Shrigalava Vaasudeva,' sneered Uddhava. 'Krishna proved invincible. The sea, at his behest, surrounded the Hill and extinguished the fire. Then both the brothers came down the Hill and routed Jarasandha and his allies. King Gonard was killed. King Damaghosha intervened and saved Jarasandha, who is now fleeing back to his country.'

'But how did you happen to come to Karavirapura? And what happened when you came here?' asked Shvetaketu.

'Krishna wanted to make friends with Shrigalava in spite of his having betrayed him to Jarasandha; so he sent me as an envoy to inform him of his desire to come here. Your Vaasudeva would not accept the hand of friendship. He abused Krishna and insisted on my acknowledging him as the Great God. I refused, and I was sent here as your prisoner,' said Uddhava.

'And Punardatta?' asked Shvetaketu.

'That is what I want to know from you, Shvetaketu. Here is his maternal grandfather, old and wise, an ocean of learning. Here are thirteen other Acharyas, dedicated to stern discipline and to the service of Mother Saraswati. They are all flung into this living "hell," because they will not do what you have done—forswear Dharma, learning, the gods of our fathers and the *Vedas*, and accept Shrigalava as the Great God!' said Uddhava. 'And noble Punardatta, true to Gurudeva's tradition, came here to serve his grandfather and the other Acharyas. And you — you, Shvetaketu — our ideal — are the slave of Shrigalava, our jailor.'

Whilst Uddhava was speaking with such vehement eloquence, Shvetaketu stood silent, ashamed of himself. Once he had been on the highroad to attaining to the status of an Acharya, with dreams of some day being a *rishi* and having pupils of his own; now he was an officer of Shrigalava who kept the Acharyas, his Gurudeva's son and his beloved friend Uddhava, in prison. Shvetaketu looked down for a little while and in a low voice said : 'Uddhava, what I have to tell you is the story of a fall, of dreams forsaken, of a life bartered for — what you would have rightly called — the beastly life of an *asura.*'

'But how did it happen ?' asked Uddhava. 'Though Punardatta was living as a Prince, he was redeemed by Krishna.'

'No one can redeem me. I have chosen my life and must live it,' said Shvetaketu sadly.

'Why did you choose this life ? I also thought once that I had chosen my life or rather that it was chosen for me and that I had to live it,' said Punardatta reminiscently.

'Listen,' said Shvetaketu, his heart full of emotion. 'Before you, Uddhava, and Krishna left in the Punyajana ship, a strange thing happened to me. I had been to the shrine of Mahadeva, the God of all gods, whom the people in those parts call Somanath. When I had left the shrine and was sitting on a stone on the seashore, a young woman came out of the sea — she had evidently been taking a bathe. Her scanty clothing, all dripping with water, clung to her perfect limbs. I noticed the tempting grace with which her legs and hips moved, though I felt it was very wrong to do so. But I simply could not help feeling the way I did,' said Shvetaketu.

'Then I recognised her. During the days that we had been at Prabhasa, she had always attended our school during the training in arms or when I was leading the Vedic chants. You could not help noticing her, for she was tall, slim and beautiful beyond description, and I would remember her smiling at me whenever I had looked at her,' continued Shvetaketu.

'On her way to the shrine, she stopped near me. There was a light in her eyes, which I had never noticed in any woman's eyes before. They — her eyes — were very fine. She smiled and I felt a thrill running through my body. Then she said: "You are a fine young man — and very learned too. I have heard you chanting *mantras* at the shrine." I felt my heart throbbing. I had never heard such compliments from any young woman before.

'She added: "Come with me, will you? We are camping in a grove nearby. I should love to hear you chant the *mantras*. I also saw you training some young warriors. You were so wonderful." Her words went to my head like strong *sura* (wine). I had to go to our camp for the usual duties, but I could not tear myself away from this young woman. The sweet smell of her body overpowered my senses. For a moment, Gurudeva's teaching flashed into my mind: "Never be alone with a woman unless she is your wife." But my senses darkened my mind and I went with her.'

'Then Shaibya — that was her name — took me to the grove where the party from Karavirapura had camped. She was a princess, the daughter of the brother of King Shrigalava Vaasudeva.'

'Is that the beautiful woman whom I saw standing near Shrigalava and supporting the Queen, yesterday?' asked Uddhava.

'That is she. She always stands near the throne supporting the Queen who is not well,' said Shvetaketu and continued. 'Her party had come to that grove held sacred by them, for VAASUDEVA, the Great God, had entered Shrigalava some years ago at that very spot when he had come to Prabhasa Tirtha on a pilgrimage.'

Shvetaketu paused for a while and then continued. 'When we reached the grove, her party was ready for the evening worship of the sandals of Shrigalava. Shaibya is a sort of high-priestess of Lord VAASUDEVA. So she offered *arti*. At her request, I chanted the *mantras*. Then she offered me *prasad* which I took. There was a tang in it,

and soon my mind began to float in air with easy buoyancy.

'I found myself unusually light in spirit, and then Shaibya took me to a sequestered part of the grove and told me many flattering things. They made me feel as if I was flying through the land of the *gandharvas* [1] with Shaibya as *apsara* [2] by my side.

She talked to me of Lord VAASUDEVA, whose niece she was. She told me how Karavirapura was heaven on earth; how whoever worshipped VAASUDEVA became free of all bonds of human existence; how I, with my learning and mastery of the martial art, was born to be his right-hand man.

'I spent half the night with Shaibya, drinking in her delightful flattery. Her presence was more intoxicating than her words. I went back to our camp in the morning. When Gurudeva asked me where I had spent the night, I told a lie — oh, how I have wished since that I had had the courage to tell the truth! — that I had spent it in the shrine. I could see that Gurudeva did not believe what I said. That was when my fall began.

'Though I had resolved not to go near Shaibya's camp in the afternoon — that was the day when you left for the Punyajana ship with Krishna — I went and sat on the same stone as on the previous day. Also as on the previous day, Shaibya, after her bathe, came out of the sea, talked to me and smiled at me. And though I struggled hard not to go with her, my feet dragged me after her.

'That evening we worshipped Lord VAASUDEVA as before, and Shaibya spoke to me of how the three worlds had to be redeemed by following her uncle, than whom there was no other God. Her voice had a magic in it, which was enhanced by the jingle of the little bells on her armlets. I spent the night with her, feeling for the first time in my life that a great destiny was opening out for me.

'When I went to our camp early next morning, Gurudeva did not ask me where I had been. He had been very,

very unhappy, and, after you left, Uddhava, he became quite heart-broken. But you know he is a man of vast understanding. He understood that I was a fallen man. But he has also a large heart; he never upbraided me even so much as by a glance. And I was torn between my respect for him and infatuation for Shaibya.

'Then on the fourth day, Shaibya asked me to go with her to Karavirapura. I was very unhappy. How could I leave Gurudeva? At the same time, I saw her graceful limbs and beautiful gait day and night. They tore my heart. My disloyalty to Gurudeva stabbed me every moment. So when Gurudeva decided to leave Prabhasa, I thought that once I parted from Shaibya I should break through the magic web she had woven round me.

'Then the day of our departure came. I told Shaibya about it, almost with a breaking heart. On hearing me, her eyes filled with tears, her hand trembled as she laid it on mine. She said: "Shvetaketu, how can you be untrue to Lord VAASUDEVA? He wants you." My heart was in my mouth. I had already come to believe in VAASUDEVA because Shaibya so passionately held him to be the God of all gods. Her swimming eyes were fixed on me. Her body seemed to yearn for me. Anyway, so I thought.

'Uddhava, I lost my senses completely and took her hands in mine. She made no resistance. "Do you really want me to come with you?" I asked her with my limbs on fire. She looked down, shot a loving glance at me from her flashing eyes, and for the moment I felt what a fragile being she was. I surrendered. I did not go back to Gurudeva and came with her here.

'On our way back to Shurparaka, one evening I was standing on the deck of the ship, when Shaibya came up to me. I was thinking of how recklessly I had given up all my life, my hopes, my dreams, my future, for a strange adventure, lured by my passion for her. She came, stood by my side and looked into my eyes with her beautiful eyes which could become liquid at her will. She asked me:

"Are you sorry that you left everything for the Lord?" I shook myself out of my miserable mood. She placed her hand on mine. Her proximity set my body aflame. "I am glad I gave up everything for you, Shaibya," I said, utter misery oppressing me. And without realising what I was doing, I placed my hand round her shoulders and pressed her to my heart. Like an angry tigress, she shook herself free from me and with flaming eyes said: "Don't touch me. I am the Lord's. You must deserve me before you touch me. You must receive the Lord's consent." I felt as if I had been given a mortal blow. She belonged to Shrigalava and I was of no account! I felt mortified and begged her to forgive me. But the joy of being with her left me; at the same time I realised that thenceforward there was no retreat for me.

'I was received by Shrigalava with honours, I was put at the head of their school of military training and placed in charge of training young warriors most of whom had no experience in arms at all; many of them could not even stand steadily in a moving chariot, and their knowledge of archery was rudimentary. But soon I was called to more confidential duties. You see gold and diamonds in plenty here. We bring them from distant forests to which we alone know the approach. In a year's time, I was placed in charge of expeditions sent to bring these treasures.'

'And what about Shaibya?' asked Uddhava.

Shvetaketu sighed. 'She is as elusive as a glow-worm. She attracts me, but she is never caught. I am convinced that she plays with me. She is wholly dedicated to her uncle and does not believe that I am equally dedicated to him yet. Though she says she is fascinated by my learning and skill in arms, all the time she is testing my devotion to him. Uddhava, I have lost my Guru, and have not obtained Shaibya. Sometimes I am furious with myself,' said Shvetaketu. He heaved a deep sigh.

'And now, Shvetaketu, you have come to ask us whether we will accept Shrigalva as the Great God,' said

Uddhava with a touch of sadness in his voice. 'You, my best friend, have come to ask these venerable Acharyas, some of whom are revered even by our Gurudeva, to accept your Shrigal — jackal — as VAASUDEVA.'

Shvetaketu could give no reply. Uddhava then defiantly turned to Shvetaketu and spoke with withering contempt. 'Go and ask, if you can, these *tapasvins* (ascetics) to accept Shrigalava as God, so that you may earn a few smiles from Shaibya. Go, go, my brother, you cannot fall lower.'

Shvetaketu stood dumb, in deep humiliation. Then in a choking voice he said: 'Uddhava, I am a sinner. I have fallen beyond saving. I will go back and never come here again.'

'How would that help you or us? If you are truly repentant, help me to escape and warn Krishna; otherwise he will come here and be caught,' said Uddhava.

'How can I help you? I can't be disloyal to Shrigalava,' said Shvetaketu.

'Why? You were disloyal to Gurudeva and perhaps broke his heart. You were disloyal to your Dharma and were lured by your senses. And now, if, so as to be true to Krishna, your beloved comrade, for once you are disloyal to Shrigalava and help me to escape, Shaibya won't even discover it,' said Uddhava sarcastically.

While they were talking, Punardatta's grandfather, Acharya Rudra, starved and gaunt, on his way to the stream, paused in front of them. 'My son, as usual you have come to ask us whether we will worship Shrigalava as the Lord VAASUDEVA?' he asked Shvetaketu in a sad soft voice.

Shvetaketu, overwhelmed by a sense of shame, looked down.

'Tell him, if you dare, my son, that there are still men in this world who prefer death to accepting untruth, and Shrigalava is a living lie,' continued the old man with quiet dignity, and slowly went on his way.

Shvetaketu felt choked. Once he had dreamt of becoming an Acharya himself, a torch-bearer of truth. Now

he, a slave of passion, had come to humiliate learned Acharyas.

'Uddhava!' he impulsively caught Uddhava by the arm and said suddenly, 'I will help you to escape. Tell me how.'

And so Uddhava put on the regulation loin-cloth, silver belt, necklace and armlet of the assistant who still lay unconscious, and went up with Shvetaketu in the basket as a subordinate official of Shrigalava.

21

KRISHNA AT THE GATE

Next day, when the morning came, the palace of Shrigalava Vaasudeva was as usual in a festive mood. Courtiers, dressed in ceremonial ornaments, had gathered for the first ceremony of the day. Shvetaketu was there. In a corner stood Uddhava, now fully decked out as an officer, looking down lest he might be recognised; he had to wait till dusk before Shvetaketu could safely arrange for his stealthy departure.

There were incense, colour, flowers and music — all ready to be put to use when Shrigalava entered the court. And the bodies of the principal worshippers glistened with gold and diamonds.

Shrigalava came in to the triumphant notes of numerous conchs. The flashing jewels in his diadem, necklaces, waistband and armlets, spread round him an aura of radiance.

Then the notes of the conchs were still as he walked with a slow, majestic tread, his plump face set in a solemn look. Everyone in the compound fell prostrate on his face. When Shrigalava had reached the place near which the offerings had been stacked, he extended his hands in blessing. And the conchs sounded again.

Then an exceedingly beautiful young woman, decked in diamonds, with an *arti* light in her hands, led an elderly lady — evidently the Queen — into Shrigalava's presence.

'This is Shaibya. She is bringing Queen Padmavati,' muttered Uddhava to himself.

Uddhava missed a heart-beat when he saw Shaibya, and forgave Shvetaketu for all his faults. Shaibya was lithe and graceful, and, in the scanty dress she wore, every limb

could be traced in its vivid voluptuousness. Though she was dark-skinned, her eyes had a wonderful light in them, which became all the more impressive because it was set off by the elaborate diamond ear-rings which dangled from her shapely ears.

On the other hand, Queen Padmavati was a picture of misery. Once she must have been a beautiful woman. Now she was emaciated and her face wore a frightened look as it turned to Shrigalava. Uddhava could not help feeling that she was living in constant torture and the way she glanced at Shaibya from time to time showed that she stood in fear of her husband's niece. His heart went out to her in silent sympathy.

All those assembled rose to their feet and shouted 'Victory to Lord VAASUDEVA, the God of gods.' Then, beginning with the Queen, every one sipped a little of the water with which the feet of the living god had been washed. Uddhava could see that Queen Padmavati was going through the ceremony like an automaton, while Shaibya performed the ritual in ardent devotion, her face assuming the look of one inspired. Her devotion to her Lord was evidently everything to her.

Chants of praises for Lord VAASUDEVA were sung. Lights were lit and waved before Shrigalava, who sat with stolid dignity. People sang hymns to Vaasudeva, led by Shaibya, whose dulcet voice rose above the others in devotional intensity.

When the ceremonial was at its climax, the keeper of the fortress was seen coming to the palace. He hurriedly flung himself from the horse which he had been riding furiously, and entered the courtyard in evident perturbation. Though the courtiers and attendants went on chanting, Shrigalava's eyes caught the unceremonious entry of the keeper.

Shrigalava held up his hand. Everyone stopped singing abruptly. Then he beckoned to the keeper of the fort to approach him, which he did. After the ceremonial pro-

stration, the keeper stood with folded hands, expecting to be questioned.

'What is the matter ?' asked Shrigalava in his resounding voice.

'Victory to Lord VAASUDEVA, the Great God. Krishna-Va—,' he fumbled. 'I mean the Yadava of Mathura, has arrived at the gates. He says he has come to pay his respects to the Lord. He wants to enter the fort,' he said with a stammer, as he saw that Shrigalava's face had assumed an awe-inspiring look.

Uddhava heard what the keeper said and his heart missed a beat. Krishna had come, unaware of what had happened to him, ignorant of what a risk he was running ! 'God of all gods !' he muttered.

'We will not meet such men. Shvetaketu, come here,' said Shrigalava.

Shvetaketu had felt very anxious when the keeper announced the arrival of Krishna, but now his heart sank. He stepped forward with folded hands.

'Shvetaketu, you know his language well. Go and ask this man who he is and what he wants of us,' said Shrigalava.

Shvetaketu hesitated for a moment.

'Go and return immediately. Now let us finish the ceremony,' said Shrigalava.

Shvetaketu saw that he had no choice, and after prostrating himself was leaving Shrigalava's presence, when Queen Padmavati coughed, hesitated, and spoke, in a feeble voice, 'Lord, if a guest comes to pay his respects, should he not be welcomed ?'

Shrigalava struck the Queen dumb with a ferocious look. The words she wanted to utter were choked in her throat and even her pale, hollow cheeks were suffused with red. She would have fainted had not Shaibya supported her.

Uddhava could see how Shrigalava had tortured the queen by open insults whenever she tried to say a word of protest against his assumption of divine infallibility. He

could also see that in this vicious game, Shaibya was his instrument; in fact, she appeared to be the high-priestess whose intense devotion saved 'Shrigalava worship' from being sordid submissiveness.

Shvetaketu left the courtyard. The ceremonial was resumed, though the atmosphere was no longer festive. The *prasad* was distributed and received in unusual silence. Everyone felt as if they were waiting for an impending catastrophe.

In a short time, Shvetaketu rode back, dismounted from his horse at the gate and returned with evident signs of agitation.

After he had offered due honours, he waited with folded hands to be questioned.

'What does the man say?' asked Shrigalava.

'Lord VAASUDEVA, Great God,' Shvetaketu began in a shaking voice. 'The visitor, in reply to the Lord's question stated this: "I am Krishna, son of Vasudeva, the lord of the Shooras of Mathura. I have come alone, leaving my brother and the King of Chedi and his men behind. I want to make friends with the—," Shvetaketu hesitated for a moment—"the lord of Karavirapura"—that was his word, Lord—"and ask him for one boon: to send my friend Uddhava back to me and release the Acharyas he has detained. I will take them away with me." That was what he said.'

Shrigalava laughed loudly in contempt. 'Didn't you turn out the impudent cowherd?' he asked sternly.

'Lord, how can I do so without the Lord's order?' asked Shvetaketu. 'But I told him what the Lord had said to Uddhava: "Accept my lord as the only VAASUDEVA, God of all gods. Then the lord may be graciously pleased to allow you to see him,"' he continued.

As he said this, Shvetaketu remembered what had passed between him and Krishna. Krishna had immediately recognised him and understood the plight in which he was. With the indulgent affection of a mother, Krishna

had put him the question : 'Shvetaketu, my brother, you — you of all others, *you*, ask me to forswear the God of gods, whom we worshipped together ?' The words were uttered in a sad voice; their poignant significance had shown, more than Uddhava's indignant words had done, the depth to which he had fallen.

'What did he reply ?' asked Shrigalava.

Shvetaketu thrust back the memory of Krishna's question from his mind and became alert. 'Krishna Yadava, Lord, laughed at what I said and replied : "When I go to Mount Kailas, I will bow before the God of gods, Mahadeva. I have yet to go there," ' said Shvetaketu.

'Oh, he is wicked, impertinent, sinful,' shouted Shrigalava. 'Is he alone ? Is he armed ?' he asked.

'He rides a chariot driven by a charioteer and is attended by a man with an eagle's face, who holds his banner. He is armed with a mace, a bow, a *chakra* and a conch. He repeated that he had only come to make friends with the Lord,' said Shvetaketu.

'Make friends ! The impertinent cowherd wants to be the friend of Lord VAASUDEVA !' said Shrigalava contemptuously.

'If the Lord permits me, I will complete what he said,' Shvetaketu asked.

'Do so,' ordered Shrigalava.

'Krishna said : "For a short while I will be waiting at the gates in patience. But if Uddhava and the Acharyas are not sent to me soon, I will force open the gates and release them myself," ' said Shvetaketu.

The worshipping crowd stood horrified. A stranger had the temerity to offer a threat that he would force open the gates of Karavirapura, the shrine of Lord VAASUDEVA !

The Queen, eyeing Shrigalava in terror, piteously exclaimed : 'Lord, please, please, I beg of you, release the Acharyas.'

Shrigalava looked at her fiercely. 'No one shall dare to advise us,' he commanded, and the words froze on the lips of Queen Padmavati as she swooned in the arms of Shaibya, whose face, as Uddhava could see, was lit with pride and devotion as she looked at the awesome face of her uncle.

Shakra, the twelve-year-old son of Shrigalava, clung to his mother, sobbing.

'Before this Yadava touches the sacred gates of our shrine, he will be visited by our divine wrath. Shvetaketu, gather our best warriors, lead them out of the gates and bring back to us the head of this murderer of his uncle. Jarasandha, the son of Brihadratha, might flee before him; he was a coward. We shall punish this upstart,' said Shrigalava.

Shvetaketu felt like fainting. At that moment he saw Shrigalava's determined face — Shaibya's eyes as they were fixed on him with expectant pride — Uddhava's anxious face — and the pale face of the unconscious Queen who, throughout life, had been terrified into submission by Shrigalava. In his ears sounded the question, asked with the tender affection of a mother, by his beloved friend: 'Shvetaketu, my brother, *you* of all others ask me to forswear the God of gods whom we worshipped together?'

The fear of Shrigalava oppressed him. His longing for Shaibya tugged at his heart. But Krishna's words, and the memory of a hundred occasions when they, as students, had worshipped Mahadeva, the God of gods, together at the shrine of Mahakaleshvar in Ujjayini, proved more powerful. The struggle in Shvetaketu's heart lasted but a moment. The voice of his beloved friend won. He folded his hands and stood with head erect.

'Lord, give me any order but this. I can't fight Krishna,' said Shvetaketu firmly.

Shrigalava's face was aflame with angry surprise. Shaibya looked appalled and a cry of vexation escaped her lips.

'What!' shouted Shrigalava.

The tender voice of Krishna again sounded in Shvetaketu's ears : 'Shvetaketu, my brother, you of all others ask me to forswear the God of gods, whom we worshipped together ?' and he was no longer afraid. 'I will not fight Krishna. If the Lord wants, he can have my head,' replied Shvetaketu to Shrigalava.

The courtiers stood aghast. They had never expected such effrontery in the sacred presence, and whoever had so spoken in the past had lost his life.

Uddhava felt it was no longer necessary for him to stay there. He was decked out as an officer of Shrigalava and could be useful in opening the gates from inside, without putting Krishna to the trouble of forcing them open. Taking advantage of the shock which the assembly had received, he slipped out of the court undetected, but as he did so he could not help glancing at Shaibya whose face wore an angry look. It was a revelation; he could never have conceived that anger could look so captivating.

For a moment even Shrigalava was taken aback at the temerity of Shvetaketu. 'How is it you know him ?' he asked.

'We were both students in the *ashram* of Guru Sandipani. I loved him. I love him still,' replied Shvetaketu.

'Then you too shall die,' Shrigalava said and made the familiar gesture to his guards. 'Send this traitor to hell.'

A piercing cry escaped Shaibya as Shvetaketu surrendered his arms and was led away by the guards. While leaving the courtyard, he flung a look of defiance at her. He had broken her magic.

'And now we shall go and destroy the cowherd with our own divine hands,' said Shrigalava. 'Master of the Chariots, bring forth our chariot. Master of Arms, bring out our great bow. The God of Death is calling the Yadava.'

Soon the magic chariot came. It was a four-wheeled, gold-studded vehicle, drawn by four horses of Karavirapura

breed, small, lanky but sturdy. Two charioteers, with shining gold breast-plates, waistband and armlets, were driving it. Eight guards stood in it, wooden clubs in their hands. And Shrigalava's banner fluttered bravely from a pole held by a warrior.

Shrigalava took his mighty bow. His quiver, studded with gems, was held for him by an attendant. He stepped on to the chariot and took his seat on its high-set throne. And on that magnificent seat, dressed in gold and shining jewels, he looked like a divinity of wealth and power.

22

SHAIBYA'S WRATH

The magnificent chariot of Shrigalava Vaasudeva clattered through the gates of the city as it rushed forward, the horses prancing and the attendants shouting 'Victory unto Lord VAASUDEVA.' Shrigalava, from his high seat, looked down with contempt upon the lithe and graceful figure sitting in a chariot which, though small, was effective in battle, with the reins in his hands and waiting for a reply to his request.

No sooner did Krishna see Shrigalava's chariot rushing forward through the gates, than he pulled at the reins and the horses of his chariot sprang forward. Then he blew on his conch, *Panchajanya,* a blast of friendly greeting and shouted : 'King Shrigalava Vaasudeva of Karavirapura, I, Krishna Vaasudeva of Mathura, salute thee and offer thee my greeting.'

Shrigalava disregarded the greeting, drew an arrow from the golden quiver held out by the attendant and fixed it on the string of his bow. His voice was heard roaring above the rumble of the chariots and the clatter of the horses' hoofs : 'There is only one *Vaasudeva* in the three worlds.'

Krishna saw the arrow aimed at him and pulled at the reins adroitly. The horses of his chariot reared just as they were rushing forward, and the well-aimed arrow missed its mark, only grazing his left shoulder which was unprotected by the breast-plate and the plates which covered his arms.

Garuda let forth a terrible, weird screech, which frightened men and beasts.

Krishna's chariot was light and mobile. His powerful horses, under his expert handling, were under perfect control. They galloped up to the horses of Shrigalava's chariot; brushed against them; and then broke away without becoming interlocked with them. There was neighing and rearing and the clatter of impatient hoofs. And the cumbrous, golden chariot, with its four wheels, dragged by frightened unruly horses, stood right across the road.

Krishna stood up in his seat and, flinging the reins to the charioteer, unloosed the *Chakra* from its thong and whirled it, as he alone knew how.

Shrigalava could not see exactly what was happening and tried to fix another arrow, his hand unsteady on account of his chariot heaving like a ship on a stormy sea. Before he could do so *Sudarshana* had sped from Krishna's finger like the disc of the rising sun. Spinning it came, slit the throat of Shrigalava and spun back into Krishna's hands.

Shrigalava's body tumbled from the throne. His charioteers, frightened, could not control the horses which ran wherever they liked, dragging the golden chariot behind them. And Krishna, having taken the reins in his hand again, entered Karavirapura, his chariot thundering and Garuda screeching in wild delight.

Soon Balarama and Damaghosha arrived in the city with their men. Some of the warriors of Karavirapura, most of them with wooden clubs, opposed their entry. But Balarama had only to climb down from his chariot and attack them with his plough to make them run away. Shrigalava being dead and Shvetaketu, the commander, absent, there was practically no resistance.

Soon after, Punardatta, Shvetaketu and the learned Acharyas were set free from the 'hell' by Uddhava.

Uddhava returned to Krishna's side and told him about affairs in Karavirapura. Krishna's first act was to pay his respects to Queen Padmavati, who, now recovered from her swoon, learnt of the death of her husband with a contrary emotion of relief. Her first thought was for her son

Shakradeva, who, she thought, would now be deprived of the kingdom. She was crying, when the first words of Krishna lightened her sorrow.

'Queen of Karavirapura, I salute thee, Mother. I am sorry, very sorry, that the lord of Karavirapura has now left for the other world. I did my best to make him look upon me as a friend, but he would not. Unprovoked, he tried to kill me. Fate had willed it so, Mother,' said Krishna in an apologetic manner. Then he took the young prince to his side. 'Let me hail Shakradeva as the new king of Karavirapura. You need not be troubled about him. I will see to the obsequies of the lord. I will also be present when the prince is crowned king. I will make arrangements for him to be brought up to be worthy of being the son of so noble a mother,' continued Krishna.

Shrigalava was cremated with royal honours. Shvetaketu, as the leader of the Karavirapura forces, was at the cremation ground to do honour to the departed king.

The magic of Vaasudeva worship with himself as God, created by Shrigalava with such labour, was dispelled in a day. The ceremonial worship was abolished to the relief of all except those who had risen to royal favour by flattering the vanity of the king. The *ashrams* of the Acharyas were immediately restored to them. The old ceremonials, which had been given up through fear or favour, were cheerfully resumed by the people.

Queen Padmavati expressed a wish to distribute the gold and the jewels, which were abundantly stored in the palace and used for the worship of Shrigalava, among the poor and the learned. And immediately after the cremation, she sat in the palace courtyard, her son by her side, distributing the hoard to the deserving.

After the funeral party returned from the cremation ground, Krishna was sitting with Uddhava and Punardatta, when Shaibya rushed in. Her dishevelled hair streamed about her. Her beauteous eyes were red, swollen and fiery. Her face was equally swollen, flaming with anger.

After Shrigalava's remains had been brought to the palace before being taken to the cremation ground, she had, in defiance of religious injunctions, flung herself on them in wild riotous grief, wailing piteously, tearing her hair, beating her breasts, and addressing her dead uncle in the most pathetic terms of endearment. Now she came, hurling every imprecation at Krishna.

'Murderer! You scourge of men! A curse on your race!' she shouted as she came.

She fumbled at her waist, whipped out a knife and was about to fall upon Krishna, when Shvetaketu rushed into the room, caught hold of her from behind and tried to snatch the knife away from her.

Like a hungry tigress, she turned with deadly ferocity on Shvetaketu, trying to free her hands and to turn the knife on him.

'You coward! You worm! I brought you here! I found you a place of honour! I gave you my heart! And you betrayed the Lord and would not kill this wicked Krishna.' She was foaming at her mouth and her eyes were rolling as if she had gone mad.

The pent-up fury of Shvetaketu burst out. He also had lost control over himself. He pushed away Uddhava who was coming to his help, held Shaibya's arms in an iron grip and twisted them till the knife fell from her hand. Then he overpowered her, pushed her to the ground and forced her to sit down.

Whilst Shaibya was choked with fury, Shvetaketu gave unrestrained expression to his feelings.

'Witch! You blame me! You lured me from my Gurudeva — from my Dharma. You wanted me as your slave to do your work, to train Shrigalava's army, to make me worship that vain fool. I thought you had given me your love and would be my wife, but you extracted every service from me and remained your uncle's all the time, feeding his vanity, imposing torture on the queen and prince Shakra, and ruling over everyone through your God. You ruined my life. You were not satisfied with that; so

you wanted me to kill my dearest friend, the beloved of Mathura, the conqueror of Jarasandha. You wicked witch, woe unto the day I was born that I fell under your magic spell,' said Shvetaketu.

Shvetaketu unburdened himself with vehemence, keeping Shaibya seated on the ground, with her arms twisted so that she might not tear out his eyes, for in the struggle she had used her teeth and nails freely to inflict wounds on him.

Krishna stood up and stopped Shvetaketu holding her down with such strength.

'Shvetaketu, why do you blame her? You were lured by her — it was your fault,' said Krishna with authority. 'You were trapped by your weakness. You accepted the worship of Shrigalava because you wanted position and power. You forswore your gods, your Gurudeva and the learned Acharyas, because you were foolish enough to hope that some day Shaibya would marry you.'

Then his voice grew kind. 'And I tell you, she will marry you. She wants you. Don't you see she has lost everything — her uncle, her God, her faith, the dream of her life? She has no one, but you, to look to.'

'Vaasudeva, you don't know how heartless she is,' said Shvetaketu angrily. 'I was only a pawn in her game.'

'My brother, you don't know women,' said Krishna with a laugh. 'We are all pawns in their hands, but they can give us strength to make pawns of everyone else. Look at the way Shaibya talked to you just now. She centred her life on you and now, for the moment, she finds that the house she had built with such care has tumbled down. Take her away, by force if necessary, and restore it for her. You are the only person she wants.'

Shaibya listened to Krishna, almost stupefied. The enemy she wanted to kill was almost boring her heart. Yes! She had trusted her life to Shvetaketu, and now there was no one but he who loved her.

Krishna turned to Shaibya and spoke to her with kindness. 'Shaibya, I am sending Shvetaketu to Kundinapura.

If you don't want to go with him as his wife, come with me to Mathura. You will never forget your uncle, I know. But Queen Padmavati will never forget how you treated her when he was alive.'

'You wicked murderer!' she started saying.

'What you are saying is half true,' interrupted Krishna. 'I did kill your uncle, but not out of wickedness. I can't give him back to you. But I can give you a mother as good as the one you lost at your birth — and a brother who will give you all that a devoted brother can. And who knows, some day you will find that Shvetaketu is yours — even now he is, I know,' said Krishna.

Shaibya looked helplessly at Krishna, his words piercing the veil of her grief.

'Get up, Shaibya. Wash your face. The tears make your beautiful face ugly,' said Krishna, patting her on the back.

'No, I won't,' she said stubbornly.

'Get up, will you?' Krishna tried to raise her from the ground.

'I will tear your eyes out,' she said, not knowing what to say.

'Keep those nails ready for Shvetaketu when you meet him in Mathura. You ought not to waste them on a brother, ought you? Get up. Be brave! Mother Devaki awaits you,' said Krishna with a smile.

'You false Vaasudeva!' scowled Shaibya.

'You are older than myself, but you talk just like my little sister,' said Krishna laughing. 'Come to Mathura and see Father Vasudeva for yourself. He will tell you that I am not a false Vaasudeva, for I am his son. And if you are worthy, he will adopt even you as a daughter as well.'

'I won't come to Mathura,' said Shaibya.

'Then marry Shvetaketu and go with him to Vidarbha. You wouldn't like to live here with Queen Padmavati, would you?' asked Krishna.

Suddenly Shaibya realised her helpless position. She had made Padmavati miserable for years and years. With her as the regent in Karavirapura, she could not live there for a moment. She looked at Krishna piteously and burst into tears.

'Don't cry. I will take you to Mathura and be a good brother to you. And who knows, Shvetaketu might come there sooner than you hope for. Get your nails ready for him. He is a very wicked fellow, I warn you,' said Krishna, smiling mischievously. 'He always could shoot an arrow more accurately than I could, till you came.'

Krishna helped Shaibya to rise from the ground. 'Uddhava, please take Shaibya to the women's part of the palace.'

As Uddhava helped Shaibya, trembling with rage and frustration, to go to the *antahpur,* a flame, as it were, passed over his limbs.

And when the thirteen days' mourning had passed and Shrigalava Vaasudeva entered the Land of the Manes, Shakradeva was anointed King of Karavirapura. Rudracharya accepted the office of royal preceptor and Punardatta was deputed to be the tutor of the young king. Padmavati offered tribute to Krishna.

Damaghosha and Krishna had long talks with Shvetaketu. And on the next day, Shvetaketu, who as the senior disciple of Sandipani had once been in charge of Vinda and Anuvinda, the princes of Avanti, took the route along which Jarasandha and his allies had gone, as fast as the fastest horse in Karavirapura could carry him.

23

JARASANDHA'S NEW STRATEGY

Anuvinda's chariot sped fast. Jarasandha lay in it with his eyes closed, refusing to open them even when he was thrown against the sides of the chariot. He wanted, above all things, to flee away from the place where he had met with the greatest disaster of his spectacular career.

Before his mind came pictures of his past life, in rapid succession. He had been born with limbs almost disjointed, till Jara, a *rakshasa* midwife, reputed to be a sorceress, set him together and made him hale and hearty. When young, he had succeeded his father Brihadratha in the rulership of Girivraja, which was then torn by internecine strife. Then by intrigue he had obtained unquestioned mastery over it.

Then his brilliant career began. He consolidated the power of Girivraja; spread terror in Magadha and brought it under his sway. He began to weave an imperial fabric by favours, intrigues, betrayals and conquests. He was by turn bold and cunning, patient and irresistible, as the situation demanded. The kingdoms which surrounded Magadha soon accepted his hegemony. Damaghosha, after a brave fight, accepted his overlordship, and Bhishmaka of Vidarbha, after a disastrous defeat of the Bhoja forces under his father Kaishika, wisely invited it. And many smaller kingdoms thought it wise to meet danger halfway by diplomatic surrender.

For years Jarasandha's star was in the ascendant. He gave his daughters in alliance to Kamsa, who proved a powerful ally and a dynamic instrument. Mathura was a very important centre of Aryavarta and the Yadavas were a powerful people. With Kamsa several petty kings also

came within his imperial ambit. He celebrated the *ashwamedha* — the classical Horse Sacrifice — which gave him the status of a *chakravartin*. Kamsa led his forces in the wake of the sacrificial horse and established his suzerainty over many lands. He was very happy when the Horse Sacrifice was triumphantly concluded.

He had then felt that only three other great kings had been left in the country — Drupada of Panchala, in the rich interior, blind Dhritarashtra of Hastinapura, the centre of a flourishing empire dominated by the stern old warrior Bhishma the terrible, and Kala Yavana, the ruler of a fierce people further to the south-west. With Kamsa growing in strength, he had then decided to bring Drupada into the ambit of his power. It was but one step forward and not a difficult one, with Panchaladesha surrounded by his vassals.

Then the blow had fallen. Kamsa had been murdered. The most formidable link in his imperial chain which bound kingdoms to him had been snapped. At first he had thought that it would be child's play to dispose of Vasudeva's sons and to seat some infant Yadava on Mathura's throne, with his daughters ruling the land of Shoorasena.

But all his plans had been upset. The boys had fled. In a foolish moment, he had decided to pursue them. Now he — the irresistible emperor of Magadha — was fleeing from them. Oh, the ignominy of it! If Krishna, his enemy, whom he was out to kill, had not intervened, Balarama would have smashed his skull to pieces. Now every king in the world would laugh at his discomfiture, and every child would utter his name in ridicule!

Lying in the chariot, he would not move, would not sit up, and would not open his eyes, till he had drunk the very dregs of humiliation.

Damaghosha, his ally and friend, his vassal, whom he had so often saved from complete disaster, had turned traitor. No! His timely intervention had saved his life. If he had not spoken, Jarasandha would have died of a broken skull in a foolish adventure with cowherd boys!

His thoughts were running on. Something had to be done to retrieve the disaster. He had to gather the broken fragments of the fabric of power which it had taken a lifetime to build, and begin restoring them to some shape. This was not a time to feel frustrated, nor to indulge in vain regrets or fruitless anger. He must swallow his pride, face ridicule and begin again. The sons of Vasudeva had grown very powerful; now — there was no doubt — they could not be eliminated easily; he would have to work up patiently to a situation in which he could do so. In the meantime, all those who were his friends had to be encouraged and kept united.

The most important of his subordinate allies, reflected Jarasandha, were Damaghosha of Chedi and Bhishmaka of Vidarbha. He thought and thought, made, rejected and re-made plans, swallowed his pride and decided to repair his shattered influence over his friends. Ultimately he saw the light.

When evening came, he asked Anuvinda to stop his chariot and await the other kings who were following in their chariots at a slower pace.

He spent the night in the improvised camp restlessly, thinking and rethinking. In the morning, he decided not to break up the camp till Rukmi and the others joined him. When the others came up in the evening, they were surprised to find Jarasandha cool and collected, very different from how they had expected him to be.

They continued to camp there for two days. Whatever food and drink was left with them was brought out, and slowly, as the *sura* warmed their stomachs, the sense of humiliation began to be dissipated. Most of them were disposed to blame Damaghosha for the *contretemps*, but Jarasandha, to the surprise of everyone, defended him. He was brave and loyal, the emperor said. His intervention saved Rukmi and himself from death. No one had expected that the sons of Vasudeva were so well equipped and so valorous. There was no doubt that Krishna had work-

ed a miracle; otherwise the sea would not have saved the Gomantaka Hill in such a timely manner.

Jarasandha was an expert dissembler. He used all his skill to appear fair, to take all the blame on himself and to give a meed of praise to Damaghosha and Krishna. Slowly the others fell under the spell of his persuasive eloquence. They began to have a new respect for their chief who could be fair even in such a defeat, and were lifted out of their frustration.

The next day the party arrived at the headquarters of a petty principality. The chief, unaware of why these great kings happened to be travelling the way that they did, extended his hospitality. The stayed there for three days, hunting, carousing and laughing.

On the fourth day of their stay, Shvetaketu arrived in a chariot covered with dust. He had been riding it all day and half the night.

Anuvinda was delighted to meet his old tutor and embraced him with affection.

'I was at Karavirapura, when I heard of your departure,' Shvetaketu told Anuvinda. 'Murderous tribes inhabit those forests, and I was afraid lest you might come to harm. I, as the chief of Shrigalava's forces, know those tribes well. So I followed you. I am glad you have met with no danger so far,' he added.

Anuvinda was overwhelmed with gratitude and introduced him to Jarasandha and the others as Acharya Shvetaketu, the senior disciple of Sandipani, under whom he had undergone training in arms.

'Did you meet Krishna Vaasudeva?' asked Rukmi.

'I saw Shrigalava Vaasudeva going out of Karavirapura to meet him,' Shvetaketu said coolly.

Rukmi also joined Anuvinda in pressing him to accompany them to Kundinapura, a suggestion which he was all too eager to accept.

On the way Shvetaketu gathered the whole story of how Krishna and Balarama had put them all to flight. His mind continuously dwelt upon the events which had led to the death of Shrigalava; upon the way in which Krishna had dealt with the situation; upon Shaibya's anger and the miracle of her being tamed by Krishna. Pictures rose before his mind of Shaibya; how she had won his heart; how she had worshipped Shrigalava with devotion; how, out of her faith in her god, she had kept Queen Padmavati in perpetual terror; how she had made use of him only to further her uncle's cause; how she had lain on her uncle's dead body, grief-stricken and heart-broken; how, like a *chandika,* she had tried to avenge his death by attacking Krishna; how she had treated him, whom no doubt she considered a personal slave guilty of gross betrayal; how, when overwhelmed by Krishna's kindness, she had sobbed like a little child. He was unhappy to recall all these memories, but was happy that with Krishna she would find both affection and peace, if only she could forget that he was her uncle's murderer.

A few days later, they reached Kundinapura and King Bhishmaka received them with generous hospitality. Anyone in his position would have borne traces of being mortally humiliated, but not Jarasandha. He told the story of their discomfiture, suppressing an event here, playing down another there, but ultimately bringing out, in an entirely novel form, the nobility of Damaghosha. The King of Chedi was wise, loyal, resourceful. But for his intervention, there would have been bloodshed. Poor Vasudeva would have perhaps lost both his sons. He himself, said Jarasandha, saw the wisdom of Damaghosha's action. After all, he the Emperor, could afford to forget and forgive young boys for their immature actions; that was what Damaghosha intended to convey by his intervention. If was an advisable step. He could not find fault with his wise friend for his timely intervention.

Jarasandha, every time he repeated the story, embellished it yet more. By hearing these increasingly improved

versions of the story, even Rukmi began to believe that what the Emperor narrated were the events that had actually happened.

'Bhishmaka, Damaghosha was right. Krishna and Balarama are not kings; they are only the sons of a Shoora chief. Let us forget them and divert our attention to the game of kings,' said Jarasandha.

'What shall we do, noble lord?' asked Bhishmaka.

'What we need is a powerful community of kings, not a hunt for cowherds,' Jarasandha said with a laugh.

Every one tried to forget that it was at his instance that the party had gone to hunt out Krishna in the Sahya Mountains. That was the only way in which their self-respect could be restored.

'I agree we shall have to strengthen our alliance, now that the noble Kamsa is dead and Mathura is no longer under the *chakravartin's* influence,' said Bhishmaka.

'That won't last for long, don't worry,' said Jarasandha. 'In the meantime, I would like to cement our family bonds. I would like Rukmi to wed my grand-daughter.'

Bhishmaka was surprised. So far he had never ventured to dream that the Emperor would give his grand-daughter to his son. So far it had been commonly accepted that he would prefer to seek a matrimonial alliance with the more powerful Damaghosha.

Rukmi smiled happily. He would now be in the same position as Kamsa, the emperor's son-in-law and right-hand man.

'But I thought you had intended to wed your grand-daughter elsewhere,' said Bhishmaka. He wanted to find out whether the offer was a definite one.

'I think it would be better for Shishupala, Damaghosha's son, to marry your daughter Rukmini, noble Bhishmaka. Then all three of our royal houses would have been brought into a closer alliance,' said Jarasandha.

Shalva, the king of Saubha, with his uncanny shrewdness, saw through the emperor's game. After what had happened, Damaghosha, being an astute man, would not be too ready to enter into a matrimonial alliance with Jarasandha immediately. Damaghosha's wife, Queen Shrutashrava, was Vasudeva's sister and might not welcome the idea of having the grand-daughter of Jarasandha as her daughter-in-law. She would naturally be partial to her brother's son. And with Rukmi wedded to the emperor's grand-daughter, his sister, whose beauty was praised by the poets in all the courts, could keep Chedi in order. This was a wonderful way out, thought Shalva.

Rukmi interrupted enthusiastically. 'I would like to have Shishupala as my sister's husband. He is a brave man and generous too. He would make a fine husband for Rukmini,' he said.

'I should think so,' said Jarasandha.

'But we can't settle these things in this way,' said Bhishmaka. 'My old father, Kaishika, might object. In our family, daughters are wedded after a *swayamvara* and only to the king who is chosen by the bride for his valour.'

'Look here, Bhishmaka,' said Jarasandha. 'I can manage the *swayamvara*. Shishupala is a great warrior, an expert in arms. He will win the bride all right. Leave it to me. I will see that there is nobody else to compete and win the bride.'

'Father, don't think of these fine points,' said Rukmi. 'I have heard that in many royal houses, *swayamvaras* are so managed as to enable the desired bridegroom to win the bride. I will manage it.'

'Well, I will leave it to you then,' said Bhishmaka.

'Then let us keep this to ourselves,' said Jarasandha. 'I will have a talk with Shishupala first. Damaghosha will then readily agree to the scheme. In the meantime, when

the rains are over, noble Bhishmaka can send an invitation to the kings whom we select to attend the *swayamvara.*'

'What about Rukmi's marriage to your grand-daughter?' asked Bhishmaka.

'In Magadha, we don't follow the custom of *swayamvara.* As soon as Rukmini is married to Shishupala, you must all come to Girivraja and we shall celebrate the marriage,' said Jarasandha, with a broad smile, placing a hand on Rukmi's shoulder. 'I want you, Rukmi, to be the pillar of my empire.'

Rukmi's heart bounded in hope and joy.

24

RUKMINI ON THE WAR-PATH

The kings were holding their consultation on a small terrace on the roof of the palace. They were not aware that in an adjacent attic two young women sat, their ears glued to the closed trapdoor which opened on to the terrace.

One was Princess Suvrata, the wife of Rukmi, who somehow had begun to entertain the suspicion that there was something false about the version of the Gomantaka adventure given to her by her husband. She, with a curiosity natural to women, was anxious to learn the truth about the hunting party which had left with high hopes and returned with empty hands.

Her sister-in-law Rukmini, on occasions hostile to her, had joined her in this conspiratorial eavesdropping. After Krishna had left for the Sahya Mountains, she had spent days and nights in anxiety an his account. Since Jarasandha, Rukmi and others had gone in search of Krishna, she had had distressing visions of her brother killing this dream prince of hers. She had therefore prayed for the safety of Krishna and vowed to perform all kinds of religious observances if her brother and his friends failed in their adventure. So when she heard the story of the Gomantaka adventure given by Rukmi, she was happy that Krishna was alive, but sorely disappointed that he should owe his life to her brother and his friends. She knew that her brother hated Krishna and could not have let him go free out of kindness. So she could not reconcile herself to her brother's vaunted claim to generous deeds. Something, she felt, had happened — she could not say what — which everyone was trying to hide. And in her clever way, she had arranged with Suvrata to make an attempt to discover what it was.

When the two young princesses overheard the talks between Jarasandha and Bhishmaka, they were furious, each in her own way — Suvrata, because Rukmi was going to secure an imperial princess as her co-wife, Rukmini because they were planning her marriage with Shishupala.

Rukmini promptly decided to make friends with Suvrata. 'My sister!' she said addressing Suvrata in a mocking voice. 'You are now going to be superseded by Jarasandha's grand-daughter. I am glad you are getting your due, for you have always quarrelled with me. She won't!'

'Don't talk to me!' replied Suvrata angrily, bursting into tears. 'Why did I not die at birth?'

'Don't you see, sister, that you are no longer as young as you were? And my brother wants a younger wife,' Rukmini said.

'Be quiet, you wicked girl. Neither your brother nor you have had any love for me at any time, I know,' said Suvrata.

'I love you immensely, but you won't let me be your friend. You are always angry with me,' said Rukmini.

'I am not. You always provoke me by your impertinence,' said Suvrata, wiping her tears.

'What can I do? I have to defend myself against you,' said Rukmini with a swift transition to cordiality. 'You always side with Rukmi against me.'

'You are wrong. I have always prevented your brother from being nasty to you. But you know his temper,' said Suvrata with bitterness.

'I know, I know, dear sister,' said Rukmini, watching the changing mood of Suvrata closely. 'But for you, Rukmi would have made my life miserable. Don't worry, after all we are so like each other.'

'Oh, I am very unhappy,' said Suvrata in a choking voice.

'We shall see how my brother lets that Magadhan girl take your place. What an uncouth wife she will make! They are all barbarians — these Magadhans. I think Rukmi

does not deserve so nice a wife as you,' said Rukmini, affection beaming in her eyes and smiles.

'You can't stop your brother from marrying the *chakravarti's* grand-daughter. He is so ambitious,' said Suvrata in despair.

'Don't lose heart. We will find some way,' said Rukmini, trying to look very judicious. She had already formed a plan and was seeking an ally.

'No way is going to be found, I am sure. Your brother will never miss an opportunity to be an emperor's son-in-law,' said Suvrata bitterly.

'Ah, I have it. He will only be married to the princess of Magadha if Shishupala marries me. If he does not, you won't have a co-wife,' said Rukmini.

'Wouldn't you like to be the queen of Chedi ?' exclaimed Suvrata.

'I would do anything to make you happy, dear sister,' said Rukmini, embracing Suvrata with seeming affection. 'Let me think out a plan.'

'You are wonderful, Rukmini. I was foolish ever to think you were my enemy,' said Suvrata.

One thought, however, rankled in Rukmini's mind. She was happy that Krishna had not been killed, but very very unhappy that he should have owed his life to her brother and his friends. She sighed : men were so disappointing and Krishna was no exception, she thought.

The next day when, as usual, she went to pay her respects to her grandfather Kaishika, she was surprised to find a stranger talking confidentially to him. On seeing her, old Kaishika smiled affectionately and beckoned to her to come close to him. The handsome young man bowed to her with folded hands.

'Rukmini, my child, do you know this young man ?' Kaishika asked her. She shook her head.

'He is Acharya Shvetaketu, the disciple of Guru Sandipani, and a friend of Prince Anuvinda of Avanti,' said Kaishika.

'Yes!' she said indifferently.

'He is a friend of Uddhava,' Kaishika said slyly and added — 'and of Krishna Vaasudeva.'

'Oh!' Rukmini was all attention now.

'He comes from Karavirapura — and was sent by Krishna,' said Kaishika.

'How is he?' she could not help asking. The old man laughed outright and shook a warning finger. 'It is not right for a young unmarried princess of Vidarbha to show such interest in a young cowherd,' he said.

'Don't tease me, grandfather. Let me hear all about him,' said Rukmini.

Shvetaketu then told her of Krishna's life in Gomantaka; how he and Balarama had dealt with the princes; how Jarasandha owed his life to Krishna and Damaghosha; how Shrigalava had been killed, the Acharyas and himself set free and the affairs of Karavirapura settled; how he himself had been sent by Krishna to inform Kaishika about all this.

It was a tale of epic heroism and glorious triumph. Rukmini heard it with wide-eyed admiration. Her heart sang anthems of victory. Her hero, as she had felt all along, was a god, and when she heard how he had tamed the ferocious Shaibya, tears of joy welled forth from her large and beautiful eyes.

'I have heard nothing like this in fable or epic. And ha-ha-ha,' laughed old Kaishika. 'The invincible Jarasandha running for his life before two unaided boys! My child, it is a great day for Aryavarta. Thirty years of Jarasandha, all spent in building an empire, and gone in a day! Before you were born, Rukmini, Jarasandha destroyed our army and reduced us to vassalage. That is why I gave up my throne to your father. Today I am avenged. I am inclined to believe, as Uddhava does, that Krishna is a god.'

'I will never forget how he tamed Shaibya. He is a god, not like my Shrigalava Vaasudeva — a real god, though he does not know it,' said Shvetaketu.

'I wish he were a king or a prince instead,' said Rukmini with a half-suppressed sigh.

'So that he could be invited to your *swayamvara,*' said Kaishika with a laugh. 'My child, don't dream of cowherd boys,' he added seriously. 'You are a princess and can wed only a prince.'

Rukmini's face fell. She suppressed a sigh and changed the conversation. 'Acharya, tell me once again how Vaasudeva dealt with Rukmi. I am going to let him hear all about it from me,' she added.

Rukmini was in a waking dream. She saw the dark-blue young warrior overcoming Rukmi; intervening to save Jarasandha; destroying Shrigalava Vaasudeva; releasing the learned Acharyas; adopting Shaibya as a sister. She envied Shaibya. She herself had scarcely spoken to him. She had never been greeted with the bewitching smile, of which every one spoke with such affection. And yet she saw him day and night.

But he was a cowherd boy, at best a chief's son. She was a princess. However wonderful he was, she was a king's daughter. She could never dream of wedding the dark-blue young hero. She was destined for Shishupala, Chedi's prince. They would hold a *swayamvara;* only kings and princes would be invited; then Jarasandha would prearrange the drama. Shishupala would perform some feat; others would not compete or would straight away acknowledge defeat. He would be acclaimed the winner, and would carry her away as if she was a beautiful mare bought in the market. 'I wish I had not been born a princess, but just a cowherdess,' she thought.

Jarasandha and the other princes left for their homes, but Shvetaketu stayed behind. Kaishika wanted the young chieftain of Vidarbha to be trained in arms by Acharya Shvetaketu, the disciple of the great Sandipani. Both Bhishmaka and Rukmi liked the idea, and Shvetaketu agreed to start an *ashram* in Kundinapura.

Rukmini now introduced Acharya Shvetaketu to Suvrata, now a great friend of hers. Shvetaketu related to them

both the way Krishna had dealt with Rukmi and Jarasandha. Both would have been dead but for Krishna, he said.

Suvrata could not restrain herself any longer. One day, Rukmi was boastfully re-telling his own story in his own way for the hundredth time and she bluntly told him that he was telling a lie and that in fact they owed their lives to Krishna. Then a domestic storm followed, Suvrata lashing out at her husband for being ungrateful to Krishna and trying to wed Jarasandha's grand-daughter. The storm ended with the husband and wife not being on speaking terms for days.

Then the great news came — through travellers, pilgrims, wandering *sadhus,* Brahmans invited from place to place for rituals, messengers of kings going to and from different courts, from the retainers of those who had participated in the Gomantaka episode. A real Vaasudeva had risen; had redeemed the oppressed Yadavas; tamed the wild Garudas; commanded the sea to save Gomantaka Hill; made the invincible Jarasandha flee before him; vanquished Shrigalava Vaasudeva and rescued the Acharyas from 'hell!'

The news, carried from mouth to mouth, magnified and with miraculous elements added, swept through the hamlets, settlements and towns like wild fire. In a hundred forms, it travelled to Kundinapura through persons who told and re-told the story of the discomfiture of their prince Rukmi. And in Kundinapura's royal palace, Rukmini was mad with joy.

Her heart was now set not on a hero, not even on a king, but was lost to a god. As she insisted on Shvetaketu telling her all that he knew or had heard about Krishna again and again, she discovered that the hero of her dreams was loved by his friends as their life.

Rukmini cursed her parentage; she wished she had not been born a princess. Then like Trivakra, she would have flung herself at his feet and become a goddess also. 'Oh, why was I not born a cowherdess?' she would often mutter

to herself, and gaze at the cows in the cowshed attached to the palace as if asking them how one could be a cowherd's bride.

Rukmi proceeded to Chedi on a visit to Shishupala. Rukmini knew that he had gone there to arrange her wedding. On his return, courtiers, attended by officers, proceeded to the courts of specially chosen kings to invite them to attend the *swayamvara* of King Bhishmaka's daughter, to be held in the month in which the full-moon would be in conjunction with the constellation of Mrigashirsha.

Then a plan was formed in the clever brain of Rukmini, as bold and ingenious as ever a woman conceived. After her brother returned to Kundinapura, she denounced him in the presence of her father and the most trusted courtiers. She called him a coward, charged him with being a pawn in the hands of Jarasandha, decried his intention of wedding the Magadhan princess bartering his sister to the Chedi prince. She stormed; she upbraided; she shed copious tears; she converted herself into a walking volcano, striking attendants without reason. She threatened to commit suicide if Rukmi attempted to marry her to Shishupala.

Ultimately she held consultations with Shvetaketu and locked herself up in a solitary part of the palace, refusing to see anyone. All the time the refrain continued in her mind. 'I have to be both a cowherdess and a goddess. How? Oh, how?'

A few days later, Acharya Shvetaketu left for Mathura on the pretext of fixing his own marriage with the princess of Karavirapura, Shaibya, to whom, he alleged, he was betrothed. It was a half-truth, for the beautiful Shaibya was never out of his mind and he had, in his heart, pledged himself to her.

The domestic affairs of the royal family soon became known to the whole town and then to the countryside. Gossip ran that Rukmi wanted to wed the grand-daughter

of the emperor Jarasandha by forcing his sister to marry Shishupala; that as Rukmini was not willing, he had locked her up in the palace. Naturally there was indignation among the people at this outrageous conduct of the brother's, for Jarasandha was not popular among the people of Vidarbha. Not all the protestations of Rukmi and the specially instructed courtiers could convince the people that there was no truth in the gossip.

25

A WARRIOR PRINCESS

It was a large caravan that prepared to leave Karavirapura for Mathura. It was made up by carts drawn by sturdy oxen, carrying, besides servants and necessaries, a hoard of gold which Queen Padmavati had prevailed upon Krishna to accept; by horsemen armed with copper lances and swords, leading twenty horses and six mares, also the gift of Queen Padmavati; and by chariots in which rode Krishna, Balarama and Damaghosha, and Shaibya and her maids.

Uddhava, placed in charge of the caravan, supervised its formation, riding on horseback.

The queen and the young king Shakradeva, accompanied by the new tutor and commander Punardatta, at the head of the citizens of Karavirapura, all had tears in their eyes when they saw them depart. Padmavati blessed the brothers; the young king fell at their feet; Punardatta embraced them. Shaibya alone looked on in sullen silence and would not even fold her hands when Queen Padmavati took leave of her with a blessing. She hated all whom she was leaving behind and all those who were going with them.

And Damaghosha, as the oldest of the guests, blessed all who bade them an affectionate farewell.

Young Garuda flung himself at the feet of Krishna in reverential prostration. He would have loved to join the caravan but he had to return to Gomantaka. His father had been taken ill; he was the heir-apparent and his people had great need of him.

The Brahmans chanted Vedic *mantras*. Appropriate auspices appeared, and the caravan began its journey.

Messengers had already gone on in advance to tell the great news to the people on the way; of the rout of the formidable Jarasandha; of the death of the wicked Shrigalava; of the homage of the 'Eagle-faces' of Gomantaka; of the release of the Acharyas from 'hell'; of the coronation of Shakradeva. And wherever the news spread, people talked in awe-inspired reverence of the brothers, particularly of Krishna, around whose achievements a halo of romance had already been woven; how he had lifted Mount Govardhan; tamed the venomous Kaliya; straightened the thrice-crooked Trivakra; subdued the murderous elephant Kuvalayapida; killed the invincible Kamsa and Chanura — and finally, commanded the sea to save Gomantaka from fire, and by a weapon, more powerful than God Indra's thunderbolt and strong as the rising sun, severed Shrigalava's head from his body. The reports spread like wild fire. They travelled from mouth to mouth, from house to house, from hamlet to hamlet, from *ashram* to *ashram,* assuming a miraculous shape. A god was coming, who had come to bless and redeem mankind.

Naturally the route of the caravan attracted men, women and children. From far-off places, they came on horseback, in carts, on foot, bringing their own food, cooking under trees, sleeping under the open sky. And when the brothers came, they ran forward to receive their *darshan,* recognizing the dark-blue Krishna, and fell at his feet, shouting 'Jaya, Jaya' and placing the dust from them on their heads.

They saw Krishna's handsome face, his eyes smiling affection, his hand upraised in blessing. The face, the figure, the yellow cloth, the garland of flowers and the peacock feather on the diadem, were imprinted on their memory, to live fresh for ever during the rest of their lives. Children came shouting for joy, offering flowers and leaves, and were greeted with a pat on their head or a pinch on their cheek. And young women laughed and shot admiring glances at him.

As the caravan wound its leisurely way towards Avanti, Damaghosha was struck by the extraordinary scope of Krishna's interests. Out of bed with the rise of the morning star, Krishna would join the Acharyas in their ceremonial ablution at sunrise and offer oblations to the sacred fire. The King of Chedi was amazed at the faultless tone with which he joined the learned Acharyas in chanting the sacred *Richas*. Then Krishna went to hunt with them or took part in exercises in arms; met the people who came to see him; helped to groom and feed the horses which he loved as passionately as he did the men he lived with.

When the sun was at its zenith, he again returned to the Acharyas to take part in their rituals; later, joined the party at their noon-day meal; and met the groups which came to see him with a kindly smile or a cheering word. Often Damaghosha and Balarama sat with him to hear Rudracharya's discourses on the ways of Dharma. He would ask questions on intricate points of morals or politics.

In the afternoon, the exercise in arms was repeated; then followed the evening bathe, prayers and meal. Then after prostrating himself for the last time before the Acharyas, he would go to sleep under a shady tree, with Balarama on one side and Uddhava on the other. The more Damaghosha saw of Krishna, the more he marvelled at the versatility of his wife's nephew. His reserve of strength appeared exhaustless and the sanity of his outlook characterized every mood and action, while his warmth of affection made even a stranger feel that he was one with him.

Supervised by Uddhava, the caravan reached Ujjayini by slow stages. Guru Sandipani, and King Jayasena with his twin princes Vinda and Anuvinda, travelled out two stages in advance, to welcome the brothers and King Damaghosha. Anuvinda had returned from Kundinapura in a chastened mood. He had outgrown his regard for Jarasandha and was now full of gratitude for Krishna, who had, out of old friendship, desisted from killing him.

The next day the brothers decided that with Uddhava they would spend a day at the Guru's *ashram,* where only three years ago Krishna had brought Punardatta, recently rescued from the City of the Sun.

Uddhava, however, excused himself, saying that he had to look after the preparations for the onward journey. Krishna found this surprising for at Karavirapura they had looked forward to being at the *ashram* together. However, at the request of Krishna, Uddhava was persuaded to spend the next day with him.

As Gurudeva avidly listened to all that had happened to his disciples, his heart was full. The God of gods had given him the greatest gift which a teacher could receive, disciples who had fulfilled more than his highest expectations. In spite of the modest way in which Krishna belittled his own achievements, Sandipani almost felt like reversing their roles and falling at his pupil's feet.

Balarama talked too, describing the fight in which he had overpowered the emperor. He was in high spirits describing his own exploits. Often he laughed heartily, made humorous sallies and adorned his narrative with colourful comments. The only unhappiness he felt was that no 'nectar' was available in the Guru's *ashram.*

While Balarama was talking, two young women came to give them water. One of them was slender and graceful. The other was tall, in fact very tall for a woman, golden brown in colour, broad-shouldered and muscular, and yet shaped in graceful proportions. She had large eyes full of mischief. She moved with grace. Balarama stopped in the middle of a sentence and almost gaped at her, not rudely but in surprise. Sandipani saw the way Balarama was looking at the young woman, and laughed.

'You know Vasantika. She is Shvetaketu's sister. And the other one is my best pupil at this time. There is not a feat of arms in which she does not excel all my disciples. She can ride a horse better than most of them,' said Sandipani.

Balarama made no comment, for he could not take his

eyes off the young woman till she disappeared from the hut.

Krishna came to his rescue. 'Who is she? And why does she train herself in arms?' he asked.

'Krishna, my son, Revati is the child of tragedy. You have heard of Kushasthali near Prabhasa Tirtha. It is a sea-port, carrying on a flourishing maritime trade. Years ago, the Punyajana *rakshasas*—the sea-faring tribe to which Panchajana, who abducted Punardatta, belonged — came to Kushasthali in their ships, attacked it, put the citizens to the sword and reduced it to ashes. The King of Kushasthali, Revata Kukudmin, the father of Revati, escaped,' said Sandipani.

'King Kukudmin's lot was tragic,' continued the Guru. 'His thirty brothers and seven sons had died fighting. He had seen his womenfolk dishonoured or brutally murdered. He had stolen alone out of the burning city with an infant daughter and a few trusted retainers, and hidden himself in the hills.'

Balarama was all attention. He could not forget the young giantess, with her shapely, sinuous body.

'But Kukudmin was a man of fiery determination,' said Sandipani. 'In his hiding-place, he vowed before Brahma, his guardian deity, to recapture Kushasthali. Then he wandered from place to place, seeking assistance, but no one would give him any. His kinsmen had all been killed. His few retainers were growing old. He had no resources. He belonged to an ancient family of Sharyatas, who had no kinship with any other Aryan tribes.'

'Kukudmin was baffled, but unbent. Vengeance he had vowed, and vengeance he was determined to have. His only treasure was his daughter and he decided to make the best use of her. He made her enduring and strong. He put her through a very hard training before which even the sturdiest boy would have quailed. Then he went to Shurparaka and begged of the venerable Parashurama, the Master of irresistible might, to train his daughter as if she was a boy. The Master agreed. After she had received

training there, the Master was generous enough to say that she would receive a better finish in the latest training here than with him and sent her to me. And so she came here with her father. She has now practically finished her training. She is the only hope of Kukudmin,' said Sandipani.

'What if she cannot win back Kushasthali?' asked Balarama.

'Then the father and the daughter have decided to immolate themselves in the fire,' replied Sandipani.

'God of all gods! The father must be a terrible man,' exclaimed Balarama. 'How could he sacrifice his daughter so?'

'She is a very good child,' replied Sandipani with a smile. 'She is as heroic as the father. She herself has taken a vow to conquer Kushasthali or die. But how between the two of them — the old father and the young daughter — they could overcome the wicked Punyajanas is more than I can tell.'

'May we pay our respects to King Kukudmin?' asked Krishna.

'Certainly, I will take you to him. He lives in a solitary cave on the Sipra. You may come, but I must warn you. He does not like company — except his daughter's,' said Sandipani.

26

BALARAMA EMBARKS ON AN ADVENTURE

King Kukudmin was a tall man — taller even than Balarama — and gaunt. When Guru Sandipani, Balarama and Krishna arrived at the cave where he lived, he was sitting erect, his gnarled arms folded firmly, looking like an ageless tree dominating a stretch of desert, and weathering the storms of ages in solitary grandeur. He sat motionless, while Sandipani introduced his two disciples. He looked at them coldly; evidently he was not interested in mankind.

Sandipani told Kukudmin about the exploits of the brothers. The old king heard him without interruption, his eyes flashing with fire only when some extraordinary feat was narrated.

In the meantime Kukudmin's daughter came in and waited for his orders. Her eyes were fixed on her father with tender, protective respect, and Balarama's eyes furtively sought hers in vain.

Krishna understood the change that had come over Balarama. So far, women, all so tiny compared to his size, had had no appeal for him. He was not happy with any of them. He had kept company with the Garuda young women only in a desperate attempt to escape boredom; but he had evinced only a passing interest in them. At the same time Krishna had known throughout that his Big Brother had been unhappy. He never gave expression to his unhappiness, for he lacked the subtlety to analyse his feelings and explain them, but it was there all the same.

For the first time Balarama had now met a young woman matching him in size and strength and yet full of beauty and grace, and Krishna immediately saw that his Big Brother was attracted to her. Never before had he

seen his brother looking back ardently to catch the eyes of a woman. Now it had happened.

For a considerable time Krishna was acutely conscious that the triumphs, popularity and worship were his alone. Balarama was too large-hearted to feel envious about it; in fact, he was only too ready to give credit to Krishna. But the fact was there; with him as a constant companion, Balarama was always overshadowed. All along, therefore, Krishna had been waiting for an opportunity when his noble-hearted brother could feel reassured by achieving great triumphs himself and escape from his growing sense of inferiority.

So Krishna intervened. 'Noble King, tomorrow we want to stage a mock fight with maces between the expert disciples of Gurudeva. I hope your daughter, who is already proficient, will join us,' said Krishna.

Revati looked up, annoyed a little at what she thought was a joke at her expense. Krishna saw it and added seriously, 'Gurudeva says that she is already an expert.'

'Revati does not fight mock fights. When the time comes she will fight in real earnest,' said Kukudmin grimly, in a guttural voice, with an effort as if he had lost the habit of speaking.

'But my Big Brother is the greatest expert in mace-wielding. He will teach her a trick or two,' said Krishna.

Balarama was thrilled, but he sat silent looking at Revati with unfeigned admiration.

'Revati, child, if that is so, you can join them,' said Kukudmin. 'The tricks might be helpful.'

'As my father commands,' said Revati.

Krishna and Balarama went back to the royal palace where they were staying. On the way Krishna resumed the topic.

'Brother, it is a sad lot for a king to lose all. But he is wonderful. He has no hope, only faith. And did you see the silent, affectionate bond which subsists between the

father and the daughter ?' said Krishna. 'Did you see it ? It was beautiful !'

'Poor thing !' sighed Balarama. 'How can this girl recapture Kushasthali ? Poor, poor girl !'

Krishna smiled. 'I wish we could help. But unfortunately we are wanted in Mathura, which sorely needs to be set in order. I wish you could go to Mathura and let me go to Surashtra,' said Krishna slyly.

Balarama's eyes were lit with enthusiasm. He burst out : 'You are wanted there more than myself; perhaps I can go to the help of Kukudmin.'

'No, no, Brother. I can't be of any use in Mathura without you. What would I do alone ?' asked Krishna deprecatingly.

'Don't be modest, Krishna. Say it the other way : what will I do without you ?' said Balarama.

Krishna sighed. 'I wish we had a place like Kushasthali to fly to in case of need. We can't always find Gomantaka to run away to,' he said.

'That is an idea. With Kushasthali in King Kukudmin's hands we could always be sure of a welcome,' exclaimed Balarama.

'That's it,' Krishna said. 'Brother, if you help, King Kukudmin will surely recover Kushasthali. But I can't spare you. What should I do without you ?'

Balarama slapped Krishna on the back. 'Don't worry, Krishna. You must also learn to do without me sometimes,' said Balarama. He was in a happy mood now.

Krishna was already planning the capture of Kushasthali. He thought of Uddhava. That reminded him of the strange behaviour of his beloved friend. He had not been able to find out the reason for it; he had decided to do so the next day night when Uddhava, as his habit was, came to keep him company. But one thing was certain, Krishna thought. A change of surroundings and the satisfaction of individual achievement was as necessary to

Uddhava as to his Big Brother. And with the shrewd and faithful Uddhava by his side, Balarama was sure to accomplish his purpose.

'Well, Brother, if you decide to go, it will be heroic. But you must return in triumph,' said Krishna. 'If I were you, I would take Uddhava with me. He is friendly with old Bhikru, the master of the Panchajana ship, and his crew. They will be very helpful. Don't forget that Kushasthali is a port and you may want the help of a ship,' said Krishna.

Next day, the fully trained pupils of Sandipani met to stage a mock fight with Krishna and Balarama, which was more a trial of skill than of strength. After the first round, Krishna retired from the contest.

Balarama was in high spirits, and when he faced Revati his heart began to thrill wildly. In a tight-fitting tiger skin, she looked like a powerful tigress, sinuous in every limb.

Revati faced Balarama boldly. She had a dogged spirit and great muscular power. Soon Balarama, who thought he was playing with a child, had to change his technique. He felt that the adversary was skilled and, as his spirit was roused, forgetting that it was a mock fight, he began to wield the mace — harmless though it was — with the masterly skill of an irresistible expert. Soon by an intricate pass, of which he was the master, he sent Revati's mace flying into the air.

It was a neat performance. All collected there could not help but shout, '*Sadhu, sadhu.*' So far Revati had been above the standard in the school. Now she burst into tears and, hiding her face in her hands, ran away.

Balarama, for a moment, stood still, stupidly looking at the retreating figure. He felt miserable and regretted his folly in asserting his superiority over a newly-trained pupil, and that too a girl, and so attractive!

Krishna went up to him. 'Brother, don't stand here, dumb and hesitant. Go to her, tell her you wanted to teach her a new trick. Give her heart. This is your chance,' he said.

He pushed Balarama into action, who followed Revati, but did not know how he was to behave in the strange situation. He felt that he had now lost any chance of being accepted by Kukudmin as an ally.

When he went to the cave, he found Revati lying on the ground with her face laid on Kukudmin's lap, sobbing frantically. 'Father, father, I have failed you. I am useless. You have wasted all your efforts.'

Kukudmin sat, dry-eyed, smoothing Revati's hair.

Balarama stood in the doorway, clumsily, not knowing how to intrude into this pathetic scene of despair. 'King, forgive me,' he blurted out.

'Go away,' commanded Kukudmin in his hoarse voice.

'Revati is a fine warrior,' Balarama said diffidently.

'Don't treat me like a child,' Revati looked up from her father's lap and shouted, her face all flushed and her eyes, in spite of tears, flaming. And Balarama did not know what to say, and stood silent.

'Go away,' shouted Kukudmin.

Suddenly Balarama flung aside the restraint which he had been imposing upon himself in view of the tragic fate of the King and his admiration for the daughter. The restraint gone, he was now his natural self.

'Now stop shouting,' he bellowed in reply to Kukudmin. 'I have not come here to pay empty compliments. Your daughter is highly trained but by herself she can't win Kushasthali for you.'

An angry frown crossed Kukudmin's face.

'Do you hear? Your ideas of warfare belong to a dead age — dead — dead — dead. You can't fight like that and capture Kushasthali,' said Balarama.

'Go away,' shouted Kukudmin, and Revati looked at Balarama with hatred in her eyes as her hands trembled in rage.

'I am not going away,' shouted Balarama. 'I am going with you and I am capturing Kushasthali for you. Stop shouting. I, the son of Vasudeva, take a vow in the name

of the God of all gods. I shall see you crowned again in Kushasthali.'

Old Kukudmin gaped at Balarama's fiery look, in dumb amazement, and Revati's eyes were full of a new awe.

'Listen, I am going to teach your daughter how to wield arms in a real battle,' said Balarama with blunt frankness and in his authoritative way. 'You don't fight in a battle as she is trained to do. I will teach her to fight it. And I will drive every Punyajana *rakshasa* from Kushasthali. I will reduce it to ashes. I will help you to build a new Kushasthali. It will be like Amarapuri, the city of gods. If you shout "go away" again, I will drown you and your daughter in the Sipra, and go and take Kushasthali without you. Now tell me, do you want me to go away, or will you come with me and Uddhava to Surashtra the day after tomorrow?'

Revati looked at the volcanic giant and then at her father in expectation.

'Vasudeva's son, the God of gods has sent you to me. Let us go,' said Kukudmin, a new hope dawning in his eyes.

27

UDDHAVA'S TRIALS

That night Krishna felt very concerned about Uddhava. During all the time that they had lived together from the days of their infancy, he had never seen Uddhava so constrained, and so absent-minded, behaving so strangely. Though a man of few words, he had been open-hearted, quiet, self-effacing, always radiating warmth.

With Damaghosha and Balarama, Krishna had travelled in the first chariot; Shaibya and her maids were in the next. The Acharyas followed in other chariots or on foot, while Uddhava, being in charge of the caravan, rode around all the time on horse-back. At night, however, he came as usual to wherever Krishna happened to be waiting for him and, walking arm in arm or lying side by side as was their wont, they would exchange their impressions of the day. But a little after they began the journey, Krishna had sensed the change, though not so clearly at first. As the days went by, a new mood seemed to possess Uddhava, and, during the last two nights, he had purposely kept away from Krishna, invariably avoiding his gaze even during the day-time.

Because Krishna had insisted, Uddhava had promised to come that night and had done so. After a short conversation, both retired to sleep. Balarama was already fast asleep, breathing with heavy evenness. But Krishna, who usually went to sleep as soon as he closed his eyes, kept awake, for he found that his friend was tossing uneasily from side to side in his sleep. After some time, he sat up, drew closer to Uddhava and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder with a gesture of infinite tenderness. Uddhava woke up with a start; Krishna enveloped him in his arms.

A late moon was in the sky, throwing varied patterns of light and shade on the earth through the leafy branches of the trees.

'Uddhava, I want to talk to you. Come,' he said.

Uddhava got up and followed his friend to a platform of earth which surrounded a tree in the neighbourhood.

Krishna pulled Uddhava to his side and silently watched him for a few moments. He could see that Uddhava was nervous.

'My brother, you have become different in these days,' Krishna said softly.

Uddhava gave an imperceptible start, which Krishna did not fail to notice. 'Do I look different? You are mistaken,' he said with a forced smile.

'Uddhava, what has come between us? Have I done anything to offend you?' asked Krishna.

'You to offend me!' said Uddhava, clinging to Krishna like a drowning man. 'You would never offend me, and whatever you do, I will never take offence. Have you any doubt, Krishna?' he asked anxiously.

'No, Uddhava. That is why I want to know what troubles you.' Krishna felt a tremor passing through Uddhava's frame. 'Tell me, my brother.'

'What can I say? I don't understand it myself,' said Uddhava looking away from Krishna.

'I will try to understand it for you,' said Krishna. 'Since we left Karavirapura something has happened to you — something which had not happened to you before.'

'Nothing has happened to me. I was with you all the time,' replied Uddhava with a forced smile.

Krishna smiled indulgently. 'That is what I want to know. What happens to you and why, when I am with you? I see you feel a want, a sense of loss, a self-defeat — which you never did before. Tell me, Uddhava. Don't try to conceal it.' Krishna pressed Uddhava to his heart.

Uddhava hesitated a while, sighed, and then spoke in a voice which trembled a little. 'If you want to know, I

will tell you. I am tired of life. I want to give up this life and return to Badari Ashram,' he said and paused as he found he was unable to express himself clearly.

'Why turn an ascetic? We are here to affirm life, to rise above it, not to deny it,' said Krishna.

'You can do so, for you are a god. You are born to dominate life,' said Uddhava helplessly. 'I am not.'

'Life was meant to be lived. Even the venerable Parashurama said so. And both of us have lived it well so far,' said Krishna.

'I have no desire to live well, Krishna. Don't make me more unhappy by having to confess it. I have made up my mind,' said Uddhava, his eyes full of a silent pathetic appeal to Krishna not to probe into his heart any further.

'Brother, you can't be unhappy just because I want you to share your unhappiness with me.' Krishna suddenly stood up and gathered Uddhava to his breast as a thought struck him. 'Have you become infatuated with Shaibya?' he asked.

Uddhava hid his face on Krishna's breast. 'Krishna, don't ask me.'

'Now I know. Kamadeva's arrows have hit you, Uddhava. I now understand what you feel,' said Krishna sympathetically. 'She is pledged to Shvetaketu; you won't take her away from him; you cannot live without her; you cannot have her; you, therefore, want to renounce life.'

'Don't, don't,' piteously sobbed Uddhava. 'I have gone mad. I have sinned. I have been untrue to you.'

'Don't be so harsh to yourself. What you suffer is only natural. Woman, when the darts of Kamadeva pierce our hearts, is like fire; whoever then touches her gets singed,' said Krishna.

'I don't want only to be singed by the fire. I want to throw myself into it and be reduced to ashes. You cannot understand what I feel. You can love the Gopis and leave them without a sigh,' said Uddhava.

'You are wrong, Uddhava,' said Krishna quietly.

'You are so different from all of us, Krishna,' said Uddhava, heaving a sigh. Then his reserve broke down. 'Now that you have asked me, Krishna, let me make a clean breast of it. I was wanting to do it all these days, for I cannot live as a stranger to you. You do not know what I have suffered since we left Karavirapura. Awake or asleep, I have seen her beautiful eyes full of tears before me. I see her in my dreams. Oh, she is so wonderful!' He paused. 'And I feel like a thief when I think how Shvetaketu and Shaibya are pledged to each other.'

'How did it happen so suddenly?' asked Krishna sympathetically.

'The day we started, I went to her to see that she was well looked after. She was sitting in the chariot, her face between her knees. When I asked her whether she wanted anything, her eyes, Krishna, flashed an angry look at me. They looked so wonderful. Then my eyes fell on her neck, her shoulder, her figure — and I was struck dumb as Shvetaketu was once. My blood appeared to be on fire. I felt like fainting,' said Uddhava.

'That is Kamadeva fanning the fire,' said Krishna indulgently.

'Call it what you will,' said Uddhava. 'I then asked her to take some milk which the maid had brought. She took the earthen cup from her hands and threw it at me.'

Uddhava hesitated for a while, sighed and continued. 'I felt that I must make her eat and drink something, otherwise she would die. So I stood there obstinately holding out another cup of milk for her to take. She glared at me. I continued to smile. At last she took the cup from me and said in disgust, "You want me to take it. Very well, I will." She drank the milk and handed back the cup to the maid. "Now please go and don't make me more miserable," she said.'

'I came away, but could not forget even for a moment how she had looked at me. Then day after day I went to her twice, sometimes three times a day, and offered her

food. Every time she would stare at me, take the food from me, and after eating it, would fold her hands and beg me to leave her alone. Doing this day after day, I felt myself floating in the air. The colour of earth and heaven changed. You became distant too — almost unreal.'

Krishna smiled with understanding. 'I became a dim star in the distant sky?' he asked with a sly wink.

Uddhava ignored the irrelevant question. 'At night whether I am awake or asleep, they are before me — the angry eyes, the arching bows, the defiant nose, the long tapering fingers, the gait of voluptuous grace....,' he paused.

'If you like, I will complete the description :— of a fascinating leopardess, growling in suppressed ferocity at my poor Uddhava,' said Krishna, a little mischievously.

'Don't tease me, Krishna. You don't know how miserable I am. You don't know what happens to me night after night,' said Uddhava.

'I know you have disturbed sleep these days,' said Krishna.

'Often after midnight I wake up. My body then trembles like a leaf in a breeze; flames course along my veins; bells ring in my ears,' said Uddhava and looked down almost shamefacedly and continued in low, halting accents. 'I see her.... I cling to her..... oh, Krishna, I am fallen beyond redemption. I have no right to your love. When I am half asleep, sometimes I see myself carrying her away, stabbing Shvetaketu.'

'I know you dislike the brutish ways of our Kshatriyas — raiding and capturing women like cattle against their will,' added Uddhava.

'Yes, it is *adharma* to do so,' said Krishna.

Clinging to Krishna like a drowning man, Uddhava repeated, 'I am fallen. I am sunk in vile passion, lust and greed and jealousy.'

'And when I realised that I had fallen, I felt a shock,

Krishna,' continued Uddhava. 'I could not take away what was Shvetaketu's. I could not give her up. So I decided to renounce the world.'

'Only a few, whom the Gods bless, can renounce women and live a life of vigour. But that is not given to us all. If you go to Badari Ashram, Shaibya — in one form or other — will follow you. She will haunt your loneliness. You can't live in vigour and forget women,' said Krishna.

'I want to forget women — at least Shaibya. Otherwise I will go mad. How can I do it?' asked Uddhava.

'Control yourself,' replied Krishna.

'I don't know how I can do it,' said Uddhava in an appealing voice. 'I have never felt this way before.'

Krishna was silent for a while and then in a quiet, affectionate voice resumed. 'I told you, to us, whenever wounded by Kamadeva's arrows, woman becomes fire. We are first inclined to make of her a wayside fire to give a fleeting warmth and then pass by it on our way. Then the breezes fan the fire; the flames set fire to the grass under our feet and the dry branches overhead.'

'Very little is left of me, and whatever is left will soon be reduced to ashes,' said Uddhava bitterly.

'There is one way, the only way. Keep the warmth, but stay away from the flames,' said Krishna.

'It is easy to say so, but how? I have nothing of me left which would let me stay away,' Uddhava pleaded helplessly.

'Try. Dou you really want Shaibya?' asked Krishna.

'I want her, but I will not be untrue to my friend, Shvetaketu,' replied Uddhava.

'You can weave any woman into your life — may be not as you wish — if you convert the wayside fire into the sacrificial fire on a *vedi,* an altar.'

'Why a wayside fire?' asked Uddhava.

'Because you don't wait to inquire of what it is made; you don't care who warmed himself at it before you did,

or what will happen to it after you have left. You are only selfish; you want a passing warmth. You don't consider how it will affect you later. You don't want it to lead you to strength,' said Krishna.

'Oh!' said Uddhava.

'A passing fancy for a wayside fire will only singe; lifelong worship at the altar will give warmth — always.' Krishna placed his hands on Uddhava's shoulders and his voice, as on all such occasions, had the ring of certitude, of authority.

'Don't talk to me in riddles. Tell me clearly, please, I beg of you, Krishna,' said Uddhava helplessly.

'You want Shaibya for your life and hers?' asked Krishna.

'I want her, but I do not want to be untrue to Shvetaketu — nor to you,' Uddhava shook his head.

'Then stand true to yourself: build an altar of devotion around her; offer her the most precious thing you can offer; then she will give you the warmth and strength of the sacrificial fire,' said Krishna.

'But in that way, Krishna, she will never be mine as I want her to be,' said Uddhava, unconvinced.

'And if you throw yourself into the fire, will you become the Lord of the Fire? No, Uddhava. The sacrificial fire gives blessings only to the one who offers all, not to the one who demands all,' said Krishna.

'The thought that Shaibya will not be mine sends me mad,' said Uddhava shaking his head in utter helplessness.

'Do I not know how wonderful Shaibya is? She has the fiery spirit of a half-tamed mare. She is a woman of great ability and devotion. Only she is at war with the world — that is the trouble with her. No sooner had I seen her than I was drawn to her myself — and constructed an altar around her. I do it with every woman who enters my life. I did the same with Mother Yashoda, with the Gopis, with Vishakha, with Radha, with Mother Devaki, and even with Trivakra,' said Krishna.

'I cannot do what you can. I could only build an altar round you, and that is now defiled,' said Uddhava.

'I will show you the way to build the altar, Uddhava. It is not difficult. Are you ready to bear the thousand thorns which would afflict you as you lived with Shaibya day by day?' asked Krishna.

'Why do you ask these questions, Krishna? They hurt me. I want her for ever and ever, but I am never going to obtain her,' said Uddhava.

'Answer my question,' said Krishna. 'Would you like her to be the mother of your children, the *kula stree*, the presiding goddess of your family, who would surround you and your children with love and transmit your family traditions to your children?'

'I don't know,' Uddhava confessed. 'I have never thought of those things.'

'Then you are selfish; you have no devotion to offer her, you only want her as a passing glow,' said Krishna.

Uddhava was indignant, but speechless.

'Do think again and tell me. Do you want her to be a divinity to your children, loved, honoured and worshipped by them?' asked Krishna.

'Certainly, I do,' replied Uddhava.

'Well, then, when she grows old, ailing, decrepit, will you still be able to warm yourself? Or, when your life is running out, will you still be able to warm yourself at the dying fire?' Krishna insisted on an answer.

'How can I say? I am bewildered,' said Uddhava.

'If you cannot say it clearly, how can you enshrine Shaibya on an altar?' Krishna said slowly and became dreamily reminiscent.

'Uddhava, both you and my Big Brother have always upbraided me for leaving Radha behind in Vrindavan. But I did it because I want her to be my sacred fire. I would never have loved Radha had I not felt sure that I was going to live in Vrindavan as a cowherd for ever. But when I was called to Mathura as Vasudeva's son, it would have been wicked to bring her with me. She was born to be an

exquisite flower in the spring and would never have survived the hot winds of the life I was called upon to face. She would have never found her "Kahn" in Krishna Vaasudeva. And I, with my mission to fulfil, could not have played the gay cowherd, who was the very breath of her life. So I parted from her. She has always remained an altar fire for me and I have remained the altar fire for her. It was the only way,' said Krishna, a little sadly.

'I wish we all had your wisdom,' said Uddhava.

'If you feel so, why not let me tell you what I think wisdom is?' Krishna was now speaking with authority. 'Man and wife, Uddhava, living in mutual lifelong devotion, are at the root of Dharma. The creation springs from them. Don't destroy Dharma for a fleeting comfort at a wayside fire.'

'Remember what the Gods did in the days of old,' continued Krishna. 'They had to offer sacred *Purusha* to make creation possible. Without a sacrificial offering, you cannot create anything,' said Krishna as if speaking to himself. 'If you want a woman, you have to offer something: a present, a house to live in, lifelong protection. But in that way you will only get a woman, her body, her services. The offering, however, is like sacrificing ghee or barley or a lamb to obtain a place in heaven. If you want a divinity to inspire you to Dharma and multiply your strength a hundredfold, you must offer something vastly greater. Have not the Gods said: *"By the spirit of sacrifice alone shall sacrifice prosper"?*'

'Don't confuse me, Krishna,' said Uddhava. 'Tell me what I should do. I have always lived in and for you, always obeyed you. In this case too, I will follow your advice. You have the power to see, but I have not.'

'Then, my brother, find out for yourself whether Shaibya is a wayside fire for you or worth enshrining on an altar. She is a wonder of a woman—a splendorous creature, not exactly made for a devoted wife or a self-effacing mother, unless she has learnt to give you the devotion which she gave to her uncle. She is at present a raging

wild fire. She cannot be even a wayside fire, much less an altar fire — either for you or for Shvetaketu. Shvetaketu has accepted my advice and will wait till the darting flames — which are Shaibya today — subside,' said Krishna.

'Do you give me the same advice?' asked Uddhava.

'Yes. In the meantime, let each one of you build his own altar around her .... and who knows if the fire will be tamed and declare its own guardian god,' said Krishna.

'It is a hard, hard way,' said Uddhava.

'The hardest way is the best — for it is the way of *Tapas,* of the strength which comes of purifying the body and the mind. If *Tapas* does not purify passion, women themselves will think it an amusing game to become wayside fires; roaring like Rudras, they will sweep Dharma away. Then the unity of man and wife will be dissolved; the family bond will be snapped; the ways of our Fathers will be forgotten and the bonds which keep the worlds together will break. Men and women, lusting and irresponsible, incapable of *Tapas,* will forswear *Rita,* to which even the Gods conform. In the end, Dharma will die and men and women will be worse than beasts,' said Krishna.

Uddhava kept looking down, listening to the words of his friend.

'I have never spoken to you so freely about this, for no occasion has arisen so far,' continued Krishna. 'But, Uddhava, listen. We cannot desert Dharma. We have still very far to go. I say we — for without you, I am helpless. Your faith in me keeps me on the path of Dharma. Don't forget it.'

'Lord, forgive me,' said Uddhava, overborne by such love and kindness. 'I am not worthy of such affection. Tell me what to do, and I will do it.'

'Tomorrow or the day after, my Big Brother is going with King Kukudmin to capture Kushasthali. Go with them. Nothing makes it easier to prepare a good altar

than being away from the fire. By the time you come back, the raging flame, which is Shaibya today, will have subsided; perhaps by then Shvetaketu may have returned to Mathura,' said Krishna.

'It is a terrible thing that you ask me to do. But I swear, I will carry it out — even at the cost of my life,' said Uddhava.

'Great things, Uddhava, are always done at the cost of one's life,' said Krishna.

28

BALARAMA ON THE HIGH SEAS

Balarama and Uddhava accompanied Kukudmin and Revati to Surashtra. Damaghosha, who had heard that the Punyajana *rakshasas* were completely plunged in barbarity and perfidy and worshipped their strange god with the blood of captives and children, disapproved of this wild adventure, but out of regard for Balarama, sent ten of his tried warriors with him.

Balarama's enthusiasm was irrepressible. He talked, planned, hustled. Even five of the disciples of Sandipani caught the infection and volunteered to go with him. And when the auspices were favourable, the party started for Bhrigu Tirtha in chariots provided by King Jayasena, and from there took boat for Prabhasa.

Advance information had already been sent to the King of Prabhasa that Balarama, the conqueror of Jarasandha, was coming to worship Somanatha, the God of gods, at Prabhasa Tirtha. The fame of the Gomantaka victory had preceded him even to the distant shores of Surashtra, and people came to welcome the conqueror of Chakravarti Jarasandha.

The King of Prabhasa was taken into confidence. Claiming to be a Yadava by descent, naturally he took great pride in the achievements of Balarama. He promised to help the undertaking on condition that, after Kushasthali was taken, Girinagar, once the citadel of Kushasthali, but now ruled by his hereditary enemy, should also be captured. Balarama, who was in an expansive mood, gave the promise.

Uddhava had sensed the far-sightedness of Krishna in wanting a place of safe retreat in case Mathura was in danger again. Nothing, he now felt, could be safer than

this sparsely-occupied corner of Surashtra, which would be inaccessible to Madhyadesha kings and completely beyond the reach of Jarasandha.

Balarama was in a great hurry to take the Punyajana fort, but Kukudmin and Uddhava were for making careful preparations. Reconnaissance parties returned with the information that Kushasthali was well-nigh impregnable as the Punyajana demons had built three rings of fortresses to bar all access to it from the land. Being a sea-faring people, their concern was only to make their home secure against any land power.

Kukudmin and Uddhava, after careful consideration, decided to attack Kushasthali by sea, though by all reports it had a big fleet of ships and was not easily vulnerable.

Soon, however, good news was received. The Panchajana ship was due to arrive. So they waited for it, and, as anticipated, the ship arrived.

Bhikru's grandson Kukkura went on shore to barter goods and was overjoyed when he was taken to Uddhava. Bhikru was now the master of the ship, the nephews of Panchajana, the original owners, no longer being alive. Kukkura himself was second in command.

Kukkura took Balarama and Uddhava in a boat to meet Bhikru. He called out to his grandfather, who came out on deck, glanced at Uddhava, recognised him and was wild with joy. Ropes were lowered and they were taken aboard. When the old man found that Balarama was the elder brother of Krishna, whom the ship's crew worshipped as their god, his joy knew no bounds. Hukku and Hullu were there too, smiling broadly till their white teeth flashed, and raised both their hands to their foreheads before Balarama in homage.

Balarama and Uddhava were invited to a repast, and when the news reached the lower deck, the crew came to the upper deck and burst out into stirring songs of Krishna's feats in the Land of the Naga Kanyas which they had composed in honour of their saviour.

Bhikru told them of the events which had made him the master of the ship. On one of their trips, a few

months ago, the Panchajana boys had gone on shore at Kushasthali to secure help in massacring him and others loyal to him. Raddu, the carpenter, came to know of their intention and informed Bhikru about it.

'I could not take any chances,' said Bhikru. 'The ship was like my own child. For fifty years I had given all to it. It was my skill that had weathered a hundred storms. And it was given to me by god Krishna,' he said and smiled. 'The attack on us was to be made at midnight while we were asleep in port. But the Panchajana boys came to the ship early in the evening to throw us off our guard. I talked to Hukku and Hullu. They went to the boys while they were having a drink and cut their throats. We weighed anchor, and when we were out at sea, we sent them overboard to join their uncle.' Bhikru laughed as if it was a huge joke.

Then he asked about Krishna, and Uddhava gave a vivid account of what he and Balarama had accomplished.

Balarama impatiently broke in. 'Listen, master of the ship, we have come to capture Kushasthali. You must help us.'

'Kushasthali! No, lord, we dare not,' said Bhikru pulling his beard and making his weather-beaten face wry. 'The Punyajanas are our enemies, for they know that we got rid of Panchajana and his nephews. Even on the high seas, we always try to avoid their ships. For the sake of appearances, we have brought an idiot Punyajana with us, whom we pass off as the master whenever occasion arises,' said Bhikru with a twinkle in his eyes.

'Nothing of the kind. We are going to wipe out the Punyajana *rakshasas* both from land and sea. I want to destroy Kushasthali,' said Balarama. He could not stand any doubt about his success.

'You cannot. They are very powerful,' said Bhikru emphatically.

'I can, whether you join us or not,' retorted Balarama. 'If you join us, you will be the master of all the ships which we can capture at Kushasthali. If you don't, we

will first destroy them and then destroy you,' Balarama said in a passion.

'Oh master, you are angry. The Punyajanas are not easy to deal with,' pleaded Bhikru.

'What then ? Jarasandha is the greatest king on earth and I vanquished him,' said Balarama. 'And do you know, even the sea obeys Krishna. When Gomantaka was burning, he ordered it to quench the fire and it did.' Balarama told the story of how Gomantaka was saved from fire.

'Oh, I know, when he was with us, we never met with bad weather,' confirmed Bhikru.

'We are going anyway,' continued Balarama. 'We have five small ships. We only want a man like you who knows the sea to guide us to Kushasthali. If you come with us, we can take fifty more fighters on board your ship.'

'I can't,' the old man shook his head.

'Don't forget : you were only a steersman, a slave. Krishna made you the master of this ship. I will now make you the master of all the Punyajana ships,' said Balarama expansively.

The old man's eyes glinted with avidity, and his grandson Kukkura and Raddu, the carpenter, now third in command, were flushed with enthusiasm.

'I forgot to tell you the message Krishna sent you,' Uddhava interrupted.

'What is it ?' Bhikru asked.

'He said to me : "Tell my uncle Bhikru, and my brothers Kukkura and Raddu, and my friends Hukku and Hullu, that this is the battle of Dharma for wiping out the wicked Punyajana *rākshasas* from the sea of Surashtra. I would have come myself to help my Big Brother, but I know that when Uncle Bhikru is there, I am there myself,"' said Uddhava.

Bhikru sat quiet for a while, thinking hard.

'Grandfather, we can't let down Krishna's brother. Krishna has entrusted him to us,' said Kukkura, his voice quivering with pride. 'We will wipe out the Punyajanas. So the lord has commanded.'

Raddu nodded agreement. Bhikru felt a tug at his heart. He turned to Balarama: 'Lord, your words are commands. We will give our life for you and your brother, our master, for I have always considered this ship to belong to him.'

It was foolish to join this adventure which was sure to be disastrous. But he had looked upon Krishna as his and the ship's guardian deity; his grandson and the crew would consider him a coward if he should deny the god now. There was also a fugitive faith in his old heart: if Krishna wanted him to undertake the venture, it could only be to make him the master of all the Punyajana ships and of the wealth they brought from lands beyond the seas.

'But I am afraid there may be Punyajana war-ships in Kushasthali,' he said.

'We have Lord Balarama with us,' said Uddhava impressively. 'He is Lord Ananta Himself — the thousand-hooded, divine Serpent God, who upholds the earth.'

'Yes. Father says I am Ananta — the Timeless. He saw me in that form when I was born. And I tell you: the wicked Punyajanas will be swept out of our seas,' said Balarama, who had never objected to being considered Lord Ananta.

In the days which followed, Bhikru took command of the fleet which, besides the Panchajana ship, consisted of five more vessels. After water, food and arms in sufficient quantities had been stored on them, the King of Prabhasa saw the guests off, when at an auspicious moment the fleet left the port, flying its pinions merrily amidst the chanting of *mantras,* blowing of conchs and breaking of coconuts.

Balarama stood on the deck of the Panchajana ship with a triumphant smile on his lips, Kukudmin and Revati on one side and Uddhava and Bhikru on the other saluting with folded hands.

When the ships left the shore and shouts of 'Victory' burst forth from the assembled onlookers, Balarama turned proudly to Revati and winked — a performance which he would never have thought himself capable of before. For

the first time in the days they had spent together, Revati, who always wore a serious look, smiled. And, for lack of anything better to do, Balarama turned to Uddhava and lifted him in his arms, and thumped old Bhikru so hard on the back that he sent the master of the ship reeling.

29

BALARAMA WINS A BRIDE

The weather was good and the ships sailed on merrily with the coast in sight. Sometimes they could see men on shore watching them pass. But as they neared Kushasthali, they sighted some light Punyajana crafts which, on seeing them, spread out fan-wise and rowed straight towards them, the water foaming around their bows.

Two of the Punyajana ships had rams, which crashed into the bow-timbers of some of Balarama's ships. The cries of the dying were heard as arrows flew from Sandipani's pupils and Damaghosha's fighting men. A Punyajana ship shot past Bhikru's ship and splintered both its rudders. There was a cry of horror raised by the ship's crew.

Balarama roared with rage as he hurled a grappling iron at the offending ship, with a deadly aim. It fastened itself to her stern and jerked her to a stand-still. The timber cracked and the ship broke, sending her men to struggle for their lives in the sea.

When night fell, the Punyajana ships sailed away. They halted at a distance and lighted pitch-pots to illumine the sea around them, lest Bhikru's ships might attack them in the dark.

The sea was quiet. The sails hung limp. Bhikru's rudderless ship stood still. Bhikru pulled at his beard. 'I would never have dreamt that my ship would lose its rudders and lie rocking in the sea like a log,' he said. He ordered the ship to be lighted up and Raddu spent half the night repairing the rudders.

Balarama saw that the Punyajana ships would soon sail past them and warn Kushasthali of the invading fleet. It

was, therefore, necessary to speed up and reach the port before morning. Bhikru said it was impossible, and hope began to wane in every sailor's heart as the sails stood limp on the mast. Balarama, however, was in one of his furious rages. He stood on the prow of Bhikru's ship, gazing intently at the sea as if he was ordering it about. Others, not knowing what he intended to do, stood at a distance in awe.

Working himself into a terrifying fury, Balarama, now full of vigour, raised his arms. 'I, Ananta, the upholder of the earth, call upon you, Maruts, the gods of the wind,' his stentorian voice was heard over the sound of the waves and the creak of the ships. 'Send wind, send a storm. Take us to Kushasthali.' He stamped his foot impatiently and roared. 'Maruts, I, Ananta, the thousand-hooded Shesha, command you. Send us wind, awaken the storm, lead us forward.'

And as he invoked the Maruts, the sea, as if it obeyed the Serpent King who upholds the earth, began to rise. The ships began to rock and a gust of wind whistled past. The torches went out. The sails began to flap wildly, soon billowing out. And the sky became overcast.

Bhikru and the crew gazed in awe at the tall figure which had miraculously raised the storm.

The Punyajana ships were taken unawares. The flames of their pitch-pots were lashed by the wind, and the burning pitch was scattered all over their decks, setting the timber on fire.

The sea thundered and the wind howled. Bhikru lashed his oarsmen into fierce activity. In spite of their efforts, all but one ship just narrowly escaped capsizing. The one that did capsize sank; its rowers and fighting men had to be taken aboard other ships. The mast of Bhikru's ship was raised and the ship responded to the improvised rudders. Led by that ship, the fleet sailed swiftly before the wind.

Soon the storm abated. Dawn broke and there was a morning breeze. Bhikru's ship, leading the others, rode

right into the harbour of Kushasthali. All the time Balarama stood on the prow, shouting orders to the fighting men to be ready to move into action. While providing himself with 'nectar,' he also distributed it with a free hand, with a cheering word for everyone.

No one on shore suspected that it was a hostile fleet that had entered the harbour. Bhikru's ship had been a familiar sight and the harbour guards looked on placidly.

Under Balarama's orders, the ram of Bhikru's ship crashed into a cargo ship anchored in the harbour and forced it on to the quay. Its mast fell over. The men sitting on its railings tumbled into the sea.

Led by Balarama, the one-hundred and twenty men jumped aboard the cargo boat, struck down everyone they met, rushed on shore and streamed through the city gates, the young giant smashing them open with his plough.

When they were within the city, the fighting men were divided into four groups — one led by Balarama; the others by Kukudmin, Uddhava and Revati, who by now had entered into the spirit of the adventure.

Bhikru knew his business. With the few fighting men left to protect him and his crew, he took command of the ships and crafts lying in the harbour, most of which were merchant ships. The surprise attack had so dazed the crews that a few lashes from Hukku and Hullu were sufficient to enforce submission.

Bhikru took charge of the sheds in which Kushasthali's ship-owners used to confine their slaves, and broke them open. He set the slaves free and put the crews of the captured ships in their place. Then he ordered the slaves, all jubilant over their liberation, to prepare food for them.

Balarama and others swept the city, killing anyone that resisted. Kushasthali was completely taken by surprise. The Punyajanas were a sea-faring, commercial people; they did not know how to fight on land. Most of their ships were far out at sea; only the artisans, craftsmen, brokers, money-lenders, priests, and unarmed slaves were living in

Kushasthali. Balarama and Kukudmin had, therefore, an easy and quick victory.

They also stormed the temple of the Punyajana god, who was worshipped by the sacrificial offering of human blood, and locked up all the priests who were preparing to offer such a sacrifice.

The wine shops were looted by the invaders. The more Balarama took to 'nectar,' the more happy and clear-eyed he found himself. He was gay with laughter. When they had finished their work, he forced 'nectar' on Revati, who, unaccustomed to the drink, threw it out, to the merriment of all. Uddhava alone did not touch the 'nectar' offered and was busy giving orders about the affairs of the city. Balarama always called Uddhava 'the ascetic' and never troubled about his strict ways.

When evening fell and the moon rose, Balarama's men, flushed with food, wine and victory, went about the streets of Kushasthali, singing loudly and complimenting each other.

The next day, the whole town was treated to high feasting. Bhikru and Kukkura had taken possession of all the ships and were busy putting them and the harbour in a shape which could resist an attack if the Punyajana ships returned. Kukudmin took charge of the city. The few of his loyal men that had survived the massacre in the old days, with their young sons and grandsons, came forward from their hiding places to help him, and the indefatigable Uddhava was by his side reorganising Kushasthali.

Balarama was in high spirits all the time. He went wherever Revati did and, when feasting, never forgot to insist upon her taking 'nectar.' And now, her pledge vindicated, she began to smile and look towards Balarama with lowered eyes full of admiration.

Then they celebrated the victory by a sacrificial session lasting three days, after which Kukudmin resumed the kingship formally. On the fourth day, Balarama ordered his men, as well as the fighting men from Kushasthali who had joined his standard, to be ready for a march.

The people of Kushasthali had come to look upon Balarama with superstitious awe. The story had gone round that he was Ananta, the thousand-hooded serpent, which upheld the earth, a god irresistible and invulnerable, and wherever he went, he was offered worship.

The fighting men from Prabhasa had proceeded ahead to prepare the Nagas who lived in the forests at the foot of Girinagar. They worshipped, as their deity, Rama of the Battle Axe (Parashurama) who, as their elders always loved to tell them, in ages gone by had freed them from the slavery of the Sharyatas. Their priests had always prophesied that Rama would return some day to bless them again with freedom. When they heard that Rama was coming to them as prophesied, they were wild with joy. Drums beat a general assembly. They emerged from the forests, clad in animal skins and armed with slings, bows and arrows, to welcome Balarama. They had hated the king and the people of Girinagar who, armed with powerful weapons, had often led their people into slavery and put their captives mercilessly to the sword.

Balarama, with his fighting force and followed by the Naga bowmen, reached the foot of Mount Girinagar and camped there. There was no one in sight, for everyone living on the sides of the Mount had withdrawn into the fortress.

One of Damaghosha's warriors brought an envoy from the fort, who came and stood in terror in front of Balarama who was leaning on his mace in a menacing attitude.

'Go and tell your Prince that I, Balarama, son of Prince Vasudeva, the Best of the Yadavas, and the conqueror of Chakravarti Jarasandha — in fact, Lord Shesha Himself — have come to Girinagar to demand tribute. Your Prince is the descendant of a branch of the Madhu Yadavas. He is therefore in charge of the kingdom as our vassal. I demand fifty chariots with horses, fifty horses and gold equal to the weight of one man. If I don't receive them by tomorrow evening, I shall demolish the fort and kill everybody who opposes me,' he said.

Balarama knew that the Prince had not even ten good chariots and scarcely gold enough to weigh against a sword.

When the message was carried to the town, Uddhava saw to it that the report of the defeat of Jarasandha and the sack of Kushasthali by Balarama, reached the people. They also learnt from the envoy that Balarama was the thousand-hooded Shesha himself. The people, when they heard the threat, grew nervous and shut themselves in their houses, refusing any aid to the King.

However, the King and his warriors with bows in their hands, mounted the chariots that were ready and, opening the city gates, thundered down upon Balarama's forces. Balarama's orders were stern. Everybody was to stand firm and strike the horses.

Balarama, in cuirass and helmet, stood in front with his plough in his hand. Revati, standing next to him, had her mace ready. Uddhava, his bow strung, was prepared, his arrow pointed at the horses' eyes. The others had their swords pointed towards the bellies of the horses. It was a firmly-knit phalanx ready to hit the horses first.

When the first chariot came near, Balarama impetuously rushed forward and fell on the horses. He smashed the skull of one of them with his plough. Then he brought the plough down again on them with lightning rapidity. The horses reared, backed and turned around. Uddhava's well-aimed arrows hit some of them in the eyes. The arrows of Nagas also sped at their eyes, and rarely missed their mark. Revati's mace staggered them.

The Girinagar warriors, sitting in rocking chariots, could scarcely fix their arrows with a steady hand or hit the target they aimed at. The horses were of a poor breed and had never been trained for battle and knew nothing of war. This was the first time they had experience of it and they were having their muzzles smashed with maces and their eyes and bellies pierced by arrows. Wounded and frightened, they turned round and fled, overturning the chariots and throwing the occupants on to the ground.

Balarama, with his warriors, pushed forward up the hill. The King was killed. The gates opened when

Balarama gave them a shattering blow with his plough. The citizens came out, offering a hearty welcome to the hero.

Balarama slapped Revati's back in great joy. He often forgot that Revati was a woman and, when under the influence of 'nectar,' treated her as if she was a favourite comrade-in-arms. And Revati, in armour, invariably took care to forget that such liberties should not be permitted to a stranger. In fact she relished them.

On the fourth day, Kukudmin arrived at Girinagar and took possession of what once was his citadel.

For a month Balarama held joyous feasts. At the end of it, Kukudmin folded his hands before his saviour.

'Balarama, you are the god Ananta Himself. You are the god of strength. I am too old to rule, and want you to accept my kingdom. I am a worshipper of Brahma, the Lord, from whose four mouths the sacred *Vedas* sprang. It was he, Lord Brahma, during the grim days of my exile, who promised me that I would regain my kingdom before I died. In the solitude of my heart, therefore, I had always hoped for this day. I am now old and useless. The age in which I lived has departed. A new age has come — it is your age. My only concern is for Revati. She is a brave girl. I want you to accept her,' said Kukudmin.

'Oh! Oh! Oh!' laughed Balarama. 'I could see it was all coming to that. But look at your daughter. She — though dressed like a man — looks down modestly like a young girl. I can say she likes me, and I like her too. But you are old and you have to have your daughter by your side to rule over Kushasthali and Girinagar.'

'Come and live with us here and be our king,' said Kukudmin.

'It is a slave alone who lives under the shadow of his father-in-law. The wife has to be with the husband. Ha-ha-ha,' Balarama laughed at his own joke. Then he grew serious. 'Noble King, please reserve your offer for later. I must now go to the rescue of Mathura. But I will come

back some day to claim my bride if she can wait for me. Will you, Revati, wait for me?' he asked. 'Your father has waited very many years to see Brahma's promise fulfilled. You can wait a few years for me, can't you?'

Revati blushed, covered her face with her hands and, between parted fingers, flashed a reply with her eyes.

30

"HE IS COMING"

During the time Krishna and Balarama were away at Gomantaka, Mathura seethed with intrigues.

The Yadavas were violent-tempered, ambitious and irrepressible, and such of them as had returned from abroad on the death of Kamsa were a law unto themselves. Ugrasena was too feeble to dominate the situation. Vasudeva was now the most influential chief, and Akrura, the most respected, but the one was too good-natured and the other too saintly to be able to enforce any discipline.

The palace of Ugrasena itself was the centre of widespread intrigues which threatened whatever solidarity the king symbolised. All the nine sons of Ugrasena had been killed in the upheaval which followed Kamsa's death. His five daughters, all married to the five brothers of Vasudeva, now free from the presence of their eldest brother, were each busy trying to serve her own ambition. Kamsaa, the eldest, married to Devabhaga, Vasudeva's brother, was the father's favourite. She was very devoted to him. She had looked after him even during the years when he had been virtually a prisoner in the palace. After Kamsa's death, she had surrounded the aged and solitary monarch with care and affection, living in the palace and visiting her husband's family only on ceremonial occasions.

Kamsaa had a different attitude towards each of her three sons. Chitraketu, the eldest, as a proud cadet of the Shooras, a closely-knit patriarchal family, was deeply attached to its head, Vasudeva, and was busy looking after the affairs of the clan. Proud of her royal lineage and devoted to her father, Kamsaa looked upon him as a stranger.

Kamsaa almost hated her youngest son, Uddhava. She had never forgiven her husband for forcing her to part with her youngest son when as an infant he was sent away to Vrindavan to be brought up as a companion to Krishna. And on his return to Mathura, she had found him wholly absorbed in Krishna. She was furious, and nursed a sense of injury against both Krishna and Uddhava. Sometimes she cursed herself for having given birth to a son, who, though of the royal line, could be a slave of a younger cadet of the Shoora family.

All her maternal instincts were reserved for the handsome Brihadbala, the second son, to whom she clung with all the strength of her fiercely possessive nature. He was her darling. She pampered him to her heart's content, and surrounded him with a jealous solicitude demanding in return undivided love.

During the years Kamsaa had lived with her father, she had kept Brihad with her, and the King also had grown fond of him. When all her brothers were dead, she naturally felt that it was the right of her favourite son to be appointed the heir-apparent. The old King, however, was very fair-minded. He offered to abdicate in favour of Krishna, as, in his view, he was the fittest to rule over Mathura. This injustice rankled in Kamsaa's heart all the time.

Kamsaa, therefore, was very much relieved when Krishna and Balarama fled from Mathura. By hints and insinuations she gave currency among the Yadavas to the notion that Krishna and Balarama, out of sheer cowardice, were unable to face Jarasandha. Then she heard with a heart full of pride and joy that her beloved son Brihad had saved Mathura from the wrath of the Emperor by his diplomatic skill.

The story of his negotiations with Jarasandha had been retailed by Brihad with appropriate modesty to the King and the Yadava chiefs, and he emerged with the reputation of a saviour. Akrura and Gada were too generous to grudge Brihad's claim to have saved Mathura, though they had more than a suspicion that Brihad had played into the

Emperor's hands by supplying him with the information about Krishna's whereabouts.

Kamsaa was also suspicious of her sisters. She had tried to persuade them to induce their husbands to support the claim of Brihad, but they had turned away from her. They shared the belief of the Shoora family that Krishna and Balarama were like gods and were sure to return.

Brihad had been associated with a group of ambitious young Yadava chiefs who had returned to Mathura after Kamsa's death. They all hated the tyrannical Kamsa and had been glad that he was got rid of, but they disliked the sudden emergence of Krishna and Balarama into importance in the life of Mathura. Of these, Satrajit and Yuyudhana — always referred to as Satyaki, being Satyaka's son — were the leaders.

When Krishna and Balarama left Mathura, Brihad and his group had the chance of their life-times. They crowed over the disgrace which the two brothers had brought on themselves by what they called cowardly flight. They were also glad that now Brihad would be the heir-apparent, for they hoped to gain immensely if a weak king came to rule Mathura.

Kamsaa had more than once ventured to mention to her husband that he should approach the King to instal Brihad as the *yuvaraja.* Devabhaga had frowned upon the suggestion. He would not permit his wife or sons to go counter to the wishes of Vasudeva, the head of the family. The law of the Aryans prescribed that the eldest male member of the family was entitled to the same unquestioned obedience as the father who was a god unto his sons.

Princess Kamsaa was very unhappy, in spite of her deceptively happy-looking and buxom appearance. She was obsessed by the idea that the world was conspiring to keep her beloved Brihad from one day becoming the King of Mathura. She could find no reason why he should not be the heir-apparent. Krishna himself had declined the throne. Her son was Ugrasena's favourite grandchild. He had saved Mathura from certain disaster and gained the

gratitude of the Yadavas. It would also be a stroke of genuine statesmanship, she thought, if the two clans, Andhakas and Shooras — so far estranged on account of Kamsa's policy — could be united in the future ruler of Mathura.

With a view to promoting her son's interests, she had been making friends with many of his supporters. Of these friends Satyaki was the most brilliant and active. Dreaming of wars in which he hoped to win all the prizes, he was impatient to see Brihad become the Crown Prince and himself the Prince's right-hand man, so that they might embark on a career of conquest. Kamsaa, by ingenious flattery, won over Satyaki and encouraged his impatience.

Whenever the King was not busy with the affairs of State, Kamsaa waited on him and worked upon him to secure her aim. However, he would never fail to impress upon everyone — however jarring it was to Kamsaa — that Krishna alone could save the Yadavas. He, therefore, naturally declined to appoint Brihad as his successor without Krishna's approval.

For months there was no news of Krishna. The rains started. The king fell ill. Taking advantage of the situation, Kamsaa, in her sweetly persuasive way, pressed upon him the claims of her son. Brihad was a worthy young man. He had served Ugrasena well. He had been the saviour of Mathura. Everyone liked him. Krishna and Balarama had not been heard of for about a year. Even Vasudeva had raised no objection to her son's claim; he had assured her himself that if the King decided to adopt Brihad as his son and heir, he would be only too willing to accept him as *yuvaraja,* the Crown Prince.

Kamsaa with tears in her eyes upbraided her father for being unjust to her and to her son. The old King, fearing that any day the God of Death might claim him, was now shaken in his faith that Krishna was sure to return, and promised her to consider her suggestion favourably.

The King called Gargacharya, the preceptor, for consultation. 'But it is *dakshinayan,*' remonstrated the Acharya.

It was the part of the year sacred to the departed Fathers of the race and no auspicious ritual could be performed during these months.

Ugrasena, lying in bed, spoke piteously: 'Best of Acharyas, we are a doomed race. Kamsa was wicked and made the Yadavas unhappy; that is why when Krishna killed him, I felt relieved. Then I thought that under Krishna's leadership my people would be powerful, rich and happy. But that was not to be.'

'Noble King, I have faith in Krishna. Nothing can happen to him. He has come to establish Dharma, and he will live to do so. It is a pity that I cannot impart my faith to you.'

'But why should he come in the way of my son?' interrupted Kamsaa who was present by the bed-side fanning her father. 'My son does not come in the way of establishing Dharma.'

'No one can,' said Ugrasena in a tired voice. 'But I do not like to appoint a *yuvaraja* when Krishna is not here. After all, without him the Yadavas cannot be saved.'

'Suppose he does not come, what then?' asked Kamsaa wrathfully.

Gargacharya shook his head at Kamsaa's lack of faith.

As if in response to her question, there was excitement in the ante-room, and Shanku, who had succeeded Pradyota as the guard in command of the fort, burst into the room.

'Lord, Lord, He is coming!'

'Who?' asked Ugrasena in a fright, as he sat up in his bed. He had been awaiting the god of Death for some time.

'Krishna Vaasudeva. And he has vanquished Jarasandha,' said Shanku, out of breath with excitement.

'God of all gods! Thou art great indeed!' muttered Ugrasena, as he fell back in bed relieved.

Gargacharya prayed in silence.

Kamsaa beat her forehead with her palms, and, bursting into tears, left the room.

Brihad was among his roistering friends, drinking, playing dice and joking. They had come hoping to hear for certain of his installation as Crown Prince and were celebrating the event in anticipation.

Young Satyaki, tall, well-knit and handsome, entered the room hurriedly and with a frown on his face shouted : 'Stop ! you fools.'

'Come, have a drink, brother,' said Brihad, who was now in that stage of intoxication when the world looks rosy and all men the best of friends. 'Those are the orders of the *yuvaraja*.'

'Stop drinking, you idiot. You are no more going to be the Crown Prince than I am,' said Satyaki, unceremoniously snatching away the cup from Brihadbala's hand and throwing it on the ground.

'All fools !' some one shouted in a drunken tone.

'What has happened ?' asked Brihad, surprised into sobriety by Satyaki's stern manner.

'He is coming,' shouted Satyaki.

'Who is coming ?' asked Brihad.

'Messengers have just brought news that Krishna has vanquished Jarasandha and will soon be here with the King of Chedi.'

For a moment everyone grew quiet. Then Virata shouted : 'Stop joking, Satyaki.'

'I am not joking. He has vanquished Jarasandha, killed Shrigalava Vaasudeva of Karavirapura in battle, and is now on his way to Avanti. In a few weeks he will be here,' replied Satyaki, his voice ringing out in solemn warning.

Everyone tried to capture sobriety by an effort. There was a scowl on the face of Brihad.

'Oh ! I thought he was dead,' he muttered between his teeth.

'That's it. He should have died,' exclaimed an inebriated Yadava youngster sitting next to him.

'He is very much alive,' shouted Satyaki so as to drown

the chatter in the room. 'Let us be sober and think of what to do next.'

After Krishna left Mathura, Vasudeva received a message from his sister Kunti about the danger which faced her sons, the five Pandavas. Akrura was, therefore, sent to Hastinapura to see things for himself and talk the matter over with the Kuru elders, Grandfather Bhishma and King Dhritarashtra.

Akrura, on his way back, visited Kurukshetra to take his holy bathe in the Saraswati and pay his respects to the Best of Munis, Veda Vyasa. After he returned to Mathura he acquainted Ugrasena and Vasudeva with the situation in which the Pandavas were placed. The elders were treating them with affection, but Dhritarashtra's sons, headed by Duryodhana, the eldest, and guided by Karna, a charioteer's son, were persecuting them in diverse ways. Yet the Sage was watchful and the Pandavas were not likely to come to harm.

After seeing the Yadava elders, Akrura came to meet Devaki. She was busy swinging the golden image of baby Krishna in a room which to her was a shrine. Devaki touched Akrura's feet; he was an elder cousin of Vasudeva.

'Devaki, still worshipping your Bala-Krishna?'[1] he commented with a smile. 'He is no longer a baby. He is our deliverer.'

'Chief Elder, soon after he was born I saw him. I have ever since been wrapped up in him as he then was. I have seen him in no other form. He would be my baby even if he became the Ruler of the Three Worlds,' Devaki replied.

'How is Subhadra doing?' asked Akrura, as he sat down in front of Devaki. Subhadra was the youngest of Devaki's children.

'Oh, she is very healthy and smiling all the time. She will grow into a beauty,' replied Devaki with a touch of pride.

'But won't she feel hurt, the way you are pouring out your heart to Bala-Krishna?' Akrura asked.

'Chief Elder, I love Subhadra as much as a mother can. But Krishna is different; he is my life, my God, my all in this world and the next. But now tell me how Kunti is, and her five sons,' said Devaki.

Akrura told her briefly about the situation in Hastinapura. Then he continued: 'Only when I recently heard Sage Veda Vyasa discoursing on *bhakti,* Divine Love, did I understand how you feel about Krishna. But, noble daughter of Devaki, how can you remain wrapped up in Bala-Gopala and be a loving mother to Subhadra?' asked Akrura.

'I can. For ten years, in prison, I suffered endless sorrows. My only solace was my prayer for the eighth son to arrive. Then Krishna was born. He may be the redeemer of the Yadavas, but to me he was God. Then for several years when I waited for him day and night, in the intensity of my longing, he was to me present in person. I saw him as a baby, fed him, played with him, sang to him, Chief Elder. He was not mine: I was his — so long as the breath was in me. Today also he is with me, always. He speaks to me. I have no will but his. I move as he wants me to. I have no life except living in him. You may not understand all this, Chief Elder, though I know you yourself look upon Krishna as God. But I am not in my perfect mind. Some of the ladies think I am touched with madness. But I have no self left; it is all Bala-Krishna. I see him everywhere,' Devaki said.

'Devaka's noble daughter, you are not mad. You have become divine. In what you feel, I see *bhakti* realised, as seen by Narada. The Best of Sages explained it to me,' said Akrura.

'What is that? I have never heard of it,' said Devaki.

'It is *Aikantika Bhakti,* the Law of Love Divine, as taught by Prajapati to the ancient kings, Vivasvan, Manu and Ikshvaku. That is what the Best of Munis said,' said Akrura.

'I never knew that I was so wise. Tell me all, all that the Best of Sages said to you,' Devaki begged him.

'I will tell you what the Venerable One told us,' said Akrura. 'Sage Narada, the conscience-keeper of the Gods, once went to NARAYANA, the Supreme. "Oh, Thou Supreme! Men worship Thee; but whom dost Thou worship?" asked the Sage. NARAYANA then said to Narada, "Though you are devoted to Me, what you have asked now cannot be explained in words. Go to Mount Meru, around which the universe revolves; from there go to Shweta Dwipa where you will meet Brihaspati, Ekata, Dwita, Trita and Vasu Uparichara. Ask them about the mystery they are seeking."'

'Did Sage Narada go to Shweta Dwipa?' asked Devaki.

'He did. But he found that Brihaspati had not realised the Supreme; he was only wedded to the *Vedas* and to sacrificial rituals. Ekata, Dwita, and Trita had not realised NARAYANA either; they were busy performing penances. Vasu Uparichara alone had realised *Him*,' said Akrura.

'How?' asked Devaki.

'In the way you have given yourself to Bala-Krishna. He had given himself to NARAYANA in Love Divine; in fact he had lost his life to Him by pouring it out for all — for gods, men and demons, for the good and the wicked. So NARAYANA Himself appeared to Vasu Uparichara and he was filled with Him,' said Akrura.

'Then what did Narada do?' asked Devaki.

'He understood what Divine Love meant. He returned to NARAYANA overflowing with Love, and the Supreme disclosed to him His cosmic form VAASUDEVA, — that is, ALL. When I heard this from the Best of Sages, I thought of you,' said Akrura.

'You are very kind, Chief Elder. I wish I could understand all you say. I am not learned,' said Devaki humbly.

'You are greater than the greatest of learned men. Your love for Bala-Krishna is what the Best of Sages called *Aikantika Bhakti* — Divine Love. It is love that knows no return, no desire for reward, no hope for heaven. It is

love that is absolute, for it is living in Him. And your love is of *Narayaniya* kind,' said Akrura.

'Today you are in a mood to say very kind things about me, Chief Elder. If my love for Bala-Krishna is *Narayaniya Bhakti* — Love Divine — then my Krishna is NARAYANA,' Devaki said with a smile.

'Who knows? He may be,' said Akrura thoughtfully. 'When I brought him to Mathura, on the way I felt for a moment that he was NARAYANA VAASUDEVA.'

'Chief Elder, let us keep this to ourselves, for others will not understand it. And our telling them what we feel, will only raise enemies for Krishna,' said Devaki.

'I know. This is our secret, Devaki,' said Akrura.

Before they could speak further, Vasudeva rushed into the room, flushed with excitement — very unusual conduct on the part of so calm a person.

'He is coming!' said Vasudeva.

'*Who* is coming?' asked Devaki, her pale face flushed with colour. She could sense who it was that was coming.

'Krishna is coming. Damaghosha is with him. They have routed Jarasandha and all his allies, who are fleeing to their lands,' said Vasudeva, his excitement making him incoherent. 'They are coming.'

'He is NATHA (the Lord)!' exclaimed Devaki, her eyes moist with joy.

Akrura looked down, closed his eyes and muttered; 'He is NATHA, NARAYANA, VAASUDEVA.'

31

THE TRIUMPHANT MARCH

By slow stages and stopping on the way whenever the rains impeded their progress, Krishna and King Damaghosha ultimately arrived at Mathura.

Mathura, headed by King Ugrasena and Vasudeva, came forth to receive them. Even women and children, whoever could come, were there. A hundred maidens, singing festive songs, carried on their heads auspiciously painted pots full of water, their openings filled with leaves and coconuts. The Brahmans, with Gargacharya, the royal preceptor, at their head, were there too, chanting the *mantras* which invoked the blessings of the gods on Krishna and the royal guest.

It was a triumph such as Mathura had never witnessed within living memory. Their redeemer had returned victorious, having vanquished no less a king than the Chakravarti.

As the caravan of chariots, riders, carts carrying gold, and men on foot leading the horses presented by Queen Padmavati, came in sight, shouts of victory rent the air. Krishna, as was his wont, was dressed in a *dhoti* and scarf of yellow silk. Wearing garlands and a peacock plume waving in his diadem, he stepped down from his chariot, above which fluttered a banner ornamented with a Garuda.

With deep respect, he prostrated himself before King Ugrasena, his father Vasudeva, Gargacharya, Akrura, and other elders. Then he fell at the feet of his mother and his step-mothers. And Trivakra, not to be outdone, fell at his feet, and so did the children. Men and women showered flowers on him, for he had brought them the blessing of the gods.

With Krishna came Guru Sandipani, blessing all with outstretched hand. Damaghosha, the King of Chedi, also received a royal welcome, Ugrasena and Vasudeva embracing him with warm cordiality.

Shaibya alighted from Damaghosha's chariot. All wondered who this dark beauty was. Her sullen eyes and proud looks, her body unadorned except for *rudraksha* beads, her strangely-folded white dress, drew every eye. The mystery was solved only when Damaghosha told her story to Ugrasena and Vasudeva and left her in charge of Mother Devaki.

Krishna, when he greeted his mother, at once told her that he had brought her 'a daughter.' This quieted Devaki's apprehensions.

Even at the moment of greeting Trivakra, he did not forget Shaibya. 'Trivakra, you look after Shaibya. She is a princess. But she is very very unhappy and as dangerous as a wild cat. I want you to treat her as if she were Mother Devaki's daughter.' And Trivakra, ever anxious to carry out his wishes, took Shaibya under her care.

Krishna moved among his people, smiling, folding his hands before the elders, and caressing the children. For each, he had the appropriate response, words of respectful affection, an affectionate enquiry about members of the family or kindly jokes, according to the age, standing or degree of relationship of the person accosted. When so addressed, each one felt happy that Krishna had him or her in mind all the time; that he was his or hers a little more than others'. However, when greeting Kamsaa and Brihadbala, he instinctively sensed their hostility, though he tried to overcome it by warm cordiality.

Then everyone went back to the city on foot, the Brahmans chanting *mantras,* the women bringing up the rear and singing songs of joy, the horses neighing, the elephants swinging their trunks merrily. The streets were decorated with arches of the leaves of auspicious trees. Feasting and dancing, bouts of wrestling and mock combats of men in arms followed. The bards sang songs of victory or recited the heroic deeds of brave Yadava ancestors.

And when the festivities were over, Damaghosha left for his kingdom.

Mathura, after drifting aimlessly among quarrels and intrigues, had found a soul. Everyone talked of Krishna; was impatient to meet him; was anxious to know what he had done or what he would do next. And everyone — even Kamsaa, and Brihad and his friends — was at pains to find out how to adjust himself to Krishna.

Brihad and his friends became very anxious when Krishna began to play his part in the affairs of the city and the King issued orders to every youth to go into training. A school for the purpose had been improvised by Guru Sandipani in a vast mango grove on the banks of the Yamuna. Horse-breeding in the city, so far looked after by old Gada, was now placed under the direction of Shanku, the general, who commanded the Yadava forces.

Orders had also been issued to breed and train horses, and to construct war chariots. Experts, supplied with the gold presented by Queen Padmavati, had gone to other lands to buy good horses wherever they could be found.

People were awestruck when they heard the new ordinance. Every one of the Yadava chieftains had to equip himself with a war chariot. It was also announced that when the full-moon came in the month of Kartik, a chariot race would be held — an institution which had been banned by Kamsa years ago when he began to destroy the power of the Yadava Chiefs.

The assembly of the Yadava Chiefs was now no longer a listless gathering of tired men who thought only in terms of their past glory. A new impulse stirred it. The present was filled with pride at Krishna's and Balarama's actions. The future was filled with the thought of what the powerful Jarasandha would do next to destroy Mathura. But all felt a new mission opening before them, since their redeemer had now emerged as the triumphant symbol of Dharma.

Everyone talked of the great events — the achievements of Gomantaka and Karavirapura; the adventure on

which Balarama and Uddhava had embarked; the new plans to make Mathura invulnerable, so that the cruel hegemony of Jarasandha could be destroyed.

The Yadavas, by a common unspoken impulse, responded to Krishna's sentiments. They realised as never before that they could not abide in freedom and power so long as the menace of Magadha hung over their heads.

The elders nodded their heads in enthusiastic assent when Vasudeva announced that the walls of Mathura were to be strengthened and the moat around it had to be made broader and deeper. 'We don't want the venerable Vikadru to tell us again that the Yadavas of Mathura cannot face an enemy,' Krishna was quoted as having said.

It was gall to Brihad. By this sudden spurt of enthusiasm, he and his friends felt themselves pushed into insignificance. They had either to fall in with these plans or just wither away.

But what angered them most was the magnetism of Krishna. Whenever Krishna went to have his morning bathe in the river, crowds collected there just to receive his *darshan.* When he visited the temple of Shiva in the centre of the town every morning and evening, worshippers crowded there and joined him in the *arti.* Townswomen came to meet Mother Devaki about the same time that he was in the habit of visiting her. Young men hastened to the gymnasium when he was wrestling or using arms; they joined him when he went to supervise the stud farm or the *goshala* and were awestruck when they saw the miracle of the restive horses, bulls and cows eating out of his hands and behaving like trustful kittens. And the race course, now being laid out afresh, was never so crowded than when he took his turn at driving a war chariot.

Brihad had become silent as never before; Satyaki, the youthful Vrishni chief, his guide and friend, no longer talked with the old self-confidence. Their young companions had lost their zest for wild living. They instinctively knew what things Krishna might disapprove of and an

oppressive sense of having to behave as he wanted them to, weighed over them.

Brihad had expected to be appointed the heir-apparent; now it was no longer possible. He had dreamt of being an ally of Jarasandha; now Mathura, mad with Krishna's victory, laughed at the Emperor. A sudden fright also seized him : someone might discover the fact that it was he who had told Jarasandha of the whereabouts of Krishna !

Kamsaa, Brihad's mother, was blind with jealous rage. The talk of installing Brihad as the *yuvaraja* had not only receded into the background, but appeared entirely irrelevant in the context of the sudden outburst of enthusiasm for making Mathura powerful. So the dream of a dark deed, ostensibly an accident, floated before her imagination.

Satyaki was the first to accustom himself to the new situation. He organised his friends into a group which, while taking part in the new activities, waited for an opportunity to gain lost ground. Following his advice, even Brihad himself submitted to an intensive training in wrestling, archery and chariot-driving.

Shaibya found it difficult to adjust herself to the new environment. She continued to brood over her uncle's death and repelled all the attempts of Devaki and Trivakra to bring her to a normal frame of mind. She became interested only in Devaki's daily worship of Bala-Krishna; it was reminiscent of the worship she had offered daily to her uncle in the great days to which she looked back with nostalgia.

Her tongue remained as sharp and her temper as uncontrollable as ever. It was difficult to quarrel with Devaki, but she sometimes pestered even her with impertinent questions, which the Mother never failed to answer in her kindly, indulgent way.

Trivakra, however, was different. She was very friendly and considerate. She let her cry to her heart's content whenever she wanted to do it. She refused to speak to her when she became sullen. But if Shaibya spoke

ill of Krishna, she lashed out with vehemence; told her of his nobility; of the miracles he had worked; of the way that he had saved her from the miserable lot of a crooked woman; and charged Shaibya with ingratitude. At the end of these exchanges, when both were tired of shouting at each other, Shaibya would burst into tears in her helplessness and Trivakra would sit by her side and comfort her with soothing words.

Every two or three days, Krishna would come to them — for Trivakra now lived with Devaki — and spend some time, talking of things which were happening in the world of men.

One day, when several ladies of rank, including Kamsaa, were present, Shaibya, in one of her bad moods, asked Mother Devaki : 'Mother, why do you spend your time feeding and dressing this gold image every day ?'

'It is my God, child,' replied Devaki with a patient smile. By now she was familiar with the unceremonious way in which Shaibya asked questions.

'Who is this god of yours ?' Shaibya asked petulantly.

'He is my son, Krishna. You know that,' replied the Mother.

'Your son ! He is not like this — a tiny baby. He has now grown up,' said Shaibya.

The other ladies, who held Mother Devaki's devotion to Bala-Krishna in the highest regard, were shocked.

'To me he will always be the Baby-Krishna,' said Devaki. 'Do you know that I did not see him for sixteen years after he was born ? Then I would have died of grief had I not worshipped him in this way,' continued Devaki frankly.

'But the image does not show him as he is. Why does he allow you to do this ?' asked Shaibya.

'He knows best,' said Devaki indulgently.

'He does not. At Karavirapura, he said in my hearing that my uncle was not VAASUDEVA. He stopped people worshipping him. And here you worship your son as if he was a god,' said Shaibya with bitterness.

'There is something wrong in the way in which you look at things, child,' replied Devaki. 'Perhaps you had better ask him when you meet him next. Everyone can see his God in the way he likes and by means of the thing which appears to him dear. I see nothing wrong in your worshipping your uncle as VAASUDEVA.'

'Oh, he killed my god, my VAASUDEVA,' Shaibya said and burst into tears.

Kamsaa came to Shaibya with a show of affection and pressed her to her bosom.

'Don't cry, my child. Don't cry. Nothing can alter what is written by the Creator on one's forehead. Come with me.' So saying, Kamsaa took the sobbing Shaibya to the Palace where she lived and where she looked after her old father, King Ugrasena.

Next day, Krishna, accompanied by Trivakra, came to find Shaibya as she stood on the terrace of Vasudeva's mansion, gazing steadfastly at the horizon and tracing pictures of the happy life which she once lived in Karavirapura.

'Shaibya, I have brought something for you,' said Krishna pleasantly.

'What is it?' she turned fiercely on Krishna.

'Yesterday, you told Mother that you did not like her worshipping my little image. I don't like it either, but to look at me as I was when a child is the joy of her life. Now I have brought you a golden image of your uncle. Perhaps you would like to worship that too,' said Krishna.

Trivakra opened a silver box and there indeed Shaibya saw a tiny image of her uncle Shrigalava Vaasudeva made in gold. Krishna took it out and offered it to her.

'You killed him in life and now want to give me a toy instead. What am I to do with this lifeless image?' she asked indignantly.

'Why? Worship it as you worshipped him in life. Bring him to life by your devotion,' Krishna said with affection. 'It will make you happy.'

'You are a fraud — a cheat!' Shaibya exclaimed.

Krishna's eyes became mischievous. 'When I was a little boy, they always called me a thief; I stole butter. Then they were right; perhaps now you are right too. That is true, isn't it? But I bring you your uncle's image. Do not spurn it,' his voice became serious. 'We must respect the dead. Don't forget that he brought you up most affectionately.'

'And you are telling me that — you who killed him!' said Shaibya. Baffled by the imperturbable sweetness of Krishna, she could do nothing but cry.

'Now don't cry. Keep this image. I have told Mother to give you a nice corner to install him. If you like, I may even come when you offer him worship,' said Krishna.

'Fraud! Hypocrite! I know why you want to present me with this image. You want me to forgive you. But I won't forgive you, I won't, I won't,' said Shaibya.

'Don't forgive me. But this image has committed no crime.' Again he was smiling.

'Yes, I will keep it. I will worship it every day if only to remind myself that I am not going to forgive you for killing my uncle.' Shaibya took the image from Krishna and applied it to her eyes out of reverence.

'There is only one more thing that I want you to do,' said Krishna with a mischievous laugh.

'I knew that there was some trick in all this. What is it? Tell me at once,' Shaibya said angrily.

'Trivakra has brought you some nice clothes and ornaments,' said Krishna, taking them from Trivakra and offering them. 'You cannot worship your uncle without dressing yourself in proper clothes and jewellery. It would be disrespectful to your uncle.'

Shaibya snatched the ornaments from Krishna's hands and flung them at him. Krishna bent down, picked them up one by one and then laughed joyfully.

'What is the matter with you, Shaibya? Won't you wear these clothes and ornaments while offering worship

to your uncle? You used to wear many such things when you worshipped him at Karavirapura,' he said.

Shaibya looked at Krishna fiercely thinking he was mocking her. But only for a moment; she saw how earnest he was to please her, and relented.

'You are a wicked man. All right! All right! I will wear these ornaments and clothes — but not for your sake, for my Vaasudeva's sake,' she said.

'That is exactly what I said,' said Krishna smilingly.

'I know you don't mean it,' Shaibya said half-apologetically.

'If I were Vaasudeva, I would, as your elder, give you a slap. You are simply impossible,' said Trivakra, who always felt disgusted at Shaibya's temperamental outbursts.

'Don't listen to her, Shaibya,' interrupted Krishna. 'If she were Krishna, there would be no Trivakra. And Shaibya is Shaibya. As you do not like me to stay any longer, I shall go,' said Krishna and left.

'Yes, leave me to myself,' said Shaibya, lapsing into a sullen mood.

Then more great news was received. Balarama had won a victory; Kushasthali had been captured. The Punyajana *rakshasas* had been destroyed. Girinagar had fallen too, and old Kukudmin was re-installed in his former kingdom.

A few days went by, and Balarama and Uddhava themselves arrived in great state and were received with jubilation. Mathura again recaptured its festive mood.

The young giant, with his plough on his shoulder, was in his element. He grew ever more expansive as he took liberal doses of 'nectar,' fraternised with whomsoever he met in his uproarious way and talked about what he had done at Gomantaka, Kushasthali and Girinagar. And while describing his achievements, whenever he referred to Revati, he slyly winked at Uddhava.

Krishna understood how the matter stood and was glad that his great-hearted brother had at last secured a satisfying mate.

In a few days, the three of them planned to send craftsmen from Mathura to rebuild Kushasthali, with a messenger who carried a heartening message from Balarama to Revati.

Uddhava was now tanned and sinewy, but more silent than ever. Without a word he slipped into his role of being Krishna's intimate friend and no more. But he was puzzled at the change that had come over his mother, Kamsaa, and could not understand why she had wormed herself into the confidence of Shaibya and was feeding the latter's grievances against Krishna.

On one of his visits to his mother, Uddhava warned her against pampering Shaibya's ugly moods. She was a fine woman and was to marry his friend Shvetaketu, he said.

Immediately Kamsaa, who was awaiting this opportunity, dissolved into tears. Her lot was miserable. She was the only one to whom the gods were always unjust. Her father always treated her, of all his children, most unjustly. Brihad was a brave young man; he deserved a better lot; but the world was conspiring to keep him out of his just dues. Then she worked herself up into seeming hysterics, watching Uddhava all the time.

'Uddhava, you are a slave of Krishna,' she said. 'You prefer Devaki's son to your own brother. You are an unnatural brother. You take no interest in Brihad's future. In fact, you, Uddhava, are bartering away your brother's heritage and your own for Krishna's glory. You always were a simpleton,' Kamsaa added. 'Krishna will never be your friend; he has always been for himself; if he could, he would sacrifice Mathura for his own glory.'

'Now, my son, tell me frankly,' she continued. 'Will you let Krishna ruin your brother's future? Won't you help?' she asked in an appealing way.

'Mother, Krishna will never hurt a right-minded person,' said Uddhava.

'You mean to say that Brihad is not a right-minded person?' asked Kamsaa angrily.

'If he is a right-minded man, Krishna himself will see

that he is not only installed as Crown Prince, but becomes a great king. Why does he not place himself by Krishna's side ?' asked Uddhava.

'Oh, you wicked boy !' Kamsaa burst into tears. 'Why did I give birth to you ? You are a traitor to your own brother.'

'Mother, won't you understand ? I want Brihad to be the king, but I want him also to be worthy of having a throne,' said Uddhava.

Uddhava reported the conversation to Krishna and requested him to set things right.

'I had already sensed that Brihad and my Aunt Kamsaa both have a grievance against me. They are right in a way. We have naturally thrown the poor man into the shade,' said Krishna and added, 'and possibly they are sorry that we came back alive.'

32

THE HONOUR OF THE YADAVAS

Some men brought a message from Vrindavan that Nanda and Yashoda would like Krishna and Balarama to come to Vrindavan to meet them. The river Yamuna had been angry with them and left the village and people and cattle in distress. Something had to be done to placate the angry goddess and bring her back and only Krishna and Balarama could do that.

'Come along, Krishna, we will go to our village and revive the memory of the old days and make the people sit up with our games,' said Balarama.

'You must go, Brother. My hands are full with the preparations for the chariot-race,' said Krishna.

'I won't go, unless you come,' said Balarama.

'Nothing of the kind, Big Brother. You must go, for you alone can compel the river goddess to hear you. You have such a way of winning women,' said Krishna with a sly smile.

'Don't talk to me in that way. Women are won to you without your trying to win them,' said Balarama.

'That is not being fair to yourself. There is a young woman waiting for you on the shores of the Surashtra sea,' said Krishna with a mischievous smile.

'And you have a woman breaking her heart for you in every home,' said Balarama laughing uproariously at his own joke. 'In Vrindavan, Radha must be dying to meet you, you wicked fellow,' said Balarama.

'That is why I don't go there,' said Krishna solemnly.

'You are cruel, very cruel,' said Balarama.

'No. I am not. If I go there, they will be happy for the time being. But when I come away again, their hearts will break a second time,' said Krishna.

'You are heartless, Krishna. Don't you ever feel unhappy at having left them, whom you loved so much?' asked Balarama.

'I love them still. That is why I think of them, not of myself,' replied Krishna.

'A fine way of thinking of them — not even to go and see them once again after years,' interrupted Balarama.

'Today their unhappiness has become a part of a joyous memory. They think of me as their darling Govinda,' said Krishna. 'But if they saw their lovable Govinda again they would only find Krishna Vaasudeva, the vanquisher of Jarasandha and the destroyer of Shrigalava Vaasudeva. They would be robbed of the Govinda they love, by far the most precious possession of their life, and the songs they sing of Govinda would be hushed. Let me live for them as the lovable little Govinda, Big Brother, as no one else,' said Krishna.

'What about me then?' asked Balarama.

'You have always been their Big Brother, strong, helpful and genial,' replied Krishna. 'And if you can bring the Yamuna back to Vrindavan, you will remain for ever their Big Brother,' said Krishna.

'Krishna, I know I cannot get you to do anything sensible,' said Balarama in disgust.

'You are the only person that can do a sensible thing for our people in Vrindavan. Take your plough with you; punish the rebellious river-goddess; bring her back to Vrindavan. They will worship you as their god,' said Krishna.

'Have you not even one kind word to send them?' asked Balarama in distress.

'Yes, I have,' said Krishna reminiscently. 'Tell them: I live in them; I think of them always; I am *ever* theirs. Tell them: Wherever I may be, Vrindavan is my home where I will always abide,' said Krishna.

Balarama left, determined to punish the river-goddess for behaving capriciously to her people.

After Balarama left, Shvetaketu arrived in Mathura

and told Krishna of what had happened in Kundinapura. Jarasandha and his allies had made a new plan, he reported. There was to be a closer alliance between Chedi and Vidarbha, by Princess Rukmini being given to Shishupala in marriage. This was planned to prevent King Damaghosha from slipping out of the net of the alliance which Jarasandha headed.

After Rukmini's marriage to Shishupala, Rukmi, the Crown Prince of Vidarbha, was to wed Apnavi, the granddaughter of the Emperor. He was then to take the place of Kamsa, as the principal lieutenant of the Chakravarti. To knit this new imperial fabric closer, following the custom of the royal house of Vidarbha, it had been decided to hold a *swayamvara,* an assembly of kings and crown princes from whom Rukmini was to choose her bridegroom.

When such *swayamvaras* were held, sometimes the bride was expected to choose the prince who best performed the prescribed feat of arms. Sometimes she was allowed to choose a bridegroom herself. But this had remained a mere form; more often the choice was settled by the parents long before the ceremony, the guests only taking part in the prearranged spectacle to consolidate a political alliance.

In this case, continued Shvetaketu, as Rukmini was determined not to choose Shishupala, the choice was to be made by the winning suitor performing a rare feat of arms, which was to be no more than a show. It was already settled that the kings and princes selected by Jarasandha were at the *swayamvara* only as guests and the emperor would see to it that no one seriously competed with Shishupala, who could then win the bride as a matter of course.

The plan was now mature. Messengers had already set out to invite the chosen princes to come to the *swayamvara,* which was fixed for the fifth day of the bright half of the month of Magha, when the Festival of Spirng was usually held.

'No invitation is sent to any prince of Mathura,' said Shvetaketu. 'They were afraid that you might attend if invited and carry away the bride.'

'But I don't want to wed a princess that way. Anyway in a *swayamvara* the bride should be free to choose whomsoever she likes,' said Krishna.

'Vaasudeva, she wants to marry you,' said Shvetaketu, lowering his voice.

'I could see that she was inclined that way when, on our way to Gomantaka, we stayed with the venerable Kaishika for a few days,' interrupted Uddhava.

'I have no time to think of marriage just now when our very existence is in danger. Jarasandha will never forgive us for the humiliation we inflicted upon him at Gomantaka, and we have to prepare ourselves to meet him whenever he decides to attack us,' said Krishna.

'But Princess Rukmini will not accept anyone else as a husband. She is a very strong-willed woman,' said Shvetaketu.

'We cannot allow strong-willed women to marry worthless men,' said Krishna with a laugh.

'But the Yadavas will find it difficult to stand the affront. None of the Yadava chiefs of Mathura has been invited,' said Uddhava. 'Our honour is at stake.'

'Whatever we do about our honour, we cannot ignore the means by which to preserve it. Let us suggest to my Father that the lord be requested to call an assembly of chiefs immediately,' said Krishna.

Brihad's friends met soon after to decide upon a course of action. The King's order imposing on the chiefs and their sons compulsory training for the chariot race excited their resentment against Krishna, for they knew that he was responsible for this new move. They hated to give up the easy life to which they had been accustomed. Some of them suspected that this was Krishna's device in order to become the ruler of Mathura. Some others were in a panic; such preparations would surely enrage Jarasandha and drive him to invade Mathura. All of them, however, were agreed in disliking Krishna. They disapproved of all he did; they envied the popularity he enjoyed; they sensed that the hope

of seeing Brihad rule Mathura, on which they had banked their future prospects, had receded into the background.

Brihad's friends tried to spread discontent against Krishna, but met with little success. People heard them, sometimes out of politeness admitted that they were right and ended by saying how wonderful Krishna was. Some elderly people advised them to talk the matter over with him; that made them furious. Surely one could dislike Krishna without having to explain to him why one did so!

Some of the young Yadava cadets, particularly those who had returned to Mathura after the death of Kamsa, were even desperadoes and were prepared to stop at nothing.

'We don't want a tyrant again,' said Satrajit, who carried a long copper sword. Though older than all others of the group, he was as rabid as the wildest of them.

'He will redeem you,' said another chief with a sneer, handling the javelin he was holding with murderous impatience.

'Well, anyway, he got rid of Kamsa,' said a third chief.

'He got rid of Kamsa because otherwise Kamsa would have got rid of him,' said Satrajit of the copper sword.

'But what do you want him to do?' asked the third speaker, a tall, thin young man, named Virata, who also carried a short copper sword. 'You have called him here, but what would you wish him to do?'

'He is a god. Let him find it out for himself,' said a joker with a face like a cherub's.

'We will ask him to stop meddling in our affairs,' said Satrajit lifting his sword with a firm significant gesture.

'What are our affairs and what are his?' said Virata. 'How are we going to stop him from doing what he wants? Most of the elders are with him.'

'You are a timid fellow, Virata,' said Bhadraka, a tall and fierce-looking man, who placed his sword in front of him. 'He has to leave us alone.'

Brihad held up his hand. The others became quiet to hear what their leader had to say. 'Virata is right.

Unless we decide upon what we want him to do, we will never be able to yoke him to our cause. What is it we want?'

'We want him not to behave as if he were our lord and master,' said Satrajit.

'How would you have him behave?' sneered Virata, who hated some of these wild fellows.

'Ask him to go back to Gomantaka. He can take back that dark, sullen-faced beauty with him, if he likes,' said Bhadraka. Some of his friends joined him in loud laughter.

'Mathura is as much his home as yours, Bhadraka,' said Virata.

'Let him stop the chariot race,' said Satrajit, 'I hate the smell of horses.'

'The people will be angry. They want the fun,' replied Virata. 'The only thing that you can ask him to do is not to come in the way of Brihadbala being installed as *yuvaraja*. I am sure you, Brihadbala, would like that to be done.'

Brihadbala smiled. 'Yes, we must go step by step.'

'I would like to punish him at the first step,' said Bhadraka, lifting his sword in a suggestive way.

Krishna came accompanied by Satyaki, who had been sent to invite him. He would not allow Uddhava to come with him. He was just as usual — unruffled, smiling, cheerful. The feather danced in his diadem, the garland swung on his chest. He was completely unarmed and some who had come with weapons felt small. He saluted all present by folding his hands, walked up to Brihadbala, his elder cousin, smiling all the time, and touched his feet.

'You have conferred a favour on me, Brother Brihadbala, by calling me to meet your friends,' said Krishna.

'Yes, no sooner had I told him that we all wanted to meet him, than Vaasudeva readily came,' said Satyaki. He had expected resistance, at least unwillingness, on Krishna's part, but he had felt almost ashamed with him-

self for carrying a long sword when Krishna, leaving his arms aside, cheerfully accompanied him.

'Vaasudeva, please sit down,' said Satyaki, who, in spite of his impetuous temper, was a finely brought up Vrishni Chief and never lacked courtesy.

'Now, how can I serve you?' asked Krishna, after he had taken his seat.

For a moment everyone was quiet. No one was ready with a definite reply.

'Stop the chariot race,' said Satrajit.

'How can I?' asked Krishna. 'The noble lord of Mathura has ordered the chiefs to be ready with five hundred chariots for the race. Those who don't want to join it, certainly need not,' he added with a smile.

'Are you making preparations for a war, Krishna? Tell me frankly,' asked Brihadbala.

'It is for the elders to decide upon war. But if there is a war for Dharma, I am always ready. If it is against Dharma, I can never be ready,' said Krishna.

'What is a war for Dharma and what is a war against it?' asked the wag.

'War is war. Is not it?' said Satyaki.

'We all live in Dharma which upholds the three worlds. Don't we all know that?' asked Krishna.

'Why do you persuade the King to do what you want?' asked Satrajit offensively. Some of the turbulent spirits did not know how to express what they felt, when Krishna talked in such a frank and friendly manner.

'Do I? You are wrong, Satrajit. I speak only when I am asked. And when I speak, I only speak the truth as I see it. It is for the King and the elders to accept what I say or not,' said Krishna.

'But you are preparing for war; we can see it,' interrupted Satyaki.

'Yes, why do you keep your purpose a secret?' asked Bhadraka. 'Do you think we are little children?'

'I have made no secret of my purpose,' said Krishna pleasantly, ignoring Bhadraka's offensive tone. 'Jarasandha

is *adharma;* he has all his life imposed his will on Aryavarta; he has vowed to destroy Mathura. We must, therefore, be ready to meet him, whenever he decides to attack us.'

'Then why did you let him go, when, as the story goes, Balarama was on the point of killing him?' asked Udyota.

'There was one reason, out of many, which prompted me to advise my Big Brother to let Jarasandha go,' Krishna said. 'If he had been killed at Gomantaka, his allies would have invaded Mathura before we could make it ready to repel them.'

'But you are a god. Why don't you take Indra's thunderbolt and finish him?' asked the wag, with a laugh in which several others joined.

'Enough of this raillery,' ordered Satyaki, who disliked the turn the conversation was taking. A new understanding of Krishna's motive was dawning on him. 'Vaasudeva, do you seriously want us to be ready for a war?' he asked.

'Yes, a war, if it is forced on us, Satyaki,' replied Krishna.

'Do you think it will be necessary?' asked Satyaki.

'Knowing Jarasandha as I do, it is inevitable. Unless we are going to give up our freedom and be his slaves,' said Krishna.

'We will be with you if Jarasandha wants a war. But you must be frank with us,' said Satyaki, who loved straightforward words.

'Have I been anything but frank with you, noble son of Satyaka?' asked Krishna.

'Then why do you prevent the lord of Mathura from installing Brihadbala as *yuvaraja?*' asked Satyaki.

'I have never spoken to the noble lord about it, one way or the other. Take my word for it, Satyaki,' said Krishna with disarming frankness. 'It is for the lord himself to do what he thinks best. I would be glad to see Brother Brihadbala installed as Crown Prince — if.....'

'If?' Brihadbala could not help interrupting with a frown.

'.....if—,' continued Krishna turning to him, 'if, Brother, you can discharge the Dharma which it involves.'

'You think that he won't be willing to undertake the responsibility?' sneered Virata.

'No. I don't. Whenever Brother Brihadbala chooses to undertake it, we shall all be ready to lay down our lives at his command,' said Krishna in a ringing tone.

'Will you stand by him if he is installed as Crown Prince? That is the point,' asked Satyaki imperiously.

Krishna for a moment stood quiet, smiling indulgently at Satyaki. All those present, forgetting their original intention of baiting Krishna, waited breathlessly to hear his next words.

'Brother, I pledge my word to you,' said Krishna to Brihadbala. 'I will always stand by you, if you stand by Dharma. And I want you, brothers, to stand by him too,' said Krishna facing his friends. 'Sharpen your weapons; we shall face Jarasandha as one,' he said smilingly, looking at the weapons which some of them held. 'And we shall win,' he said in a voice of authority.

The young chiefs, carried away by the call, shouted in exultation, 'We shall.'

Satyaki in an outburst of enthusiasm flung himself on Krishna's neck.

'*Sadhu*, Krishna, *Sadhu* (Well done),' he shouted.

'*Sadhu, sadhu*,' the others shouted.

Brihadbala, who distrusted Krishna, was taken aback by this excitement, but before he could recover from his surprise, Krishna had bowed low before him, touching his feet, and folded his hands to the rest. Then, flashing a friendly smile at the company, he walked quietly away.

33

BRIHADBALA'S DIFFICULTIES

That night the Yadava chiefs met King Ugrasena at the Palace. Shvetaketu then told the King of Jarasandha's strategy in order to consolidate his position; of the motive behind the *swayamvara* and of the manner in which it was to be held; and of the insult offered to the Yadavas of Mathura by not sending an invitation to King Ugrasena.

The chiefs discussed the situation created by this strategy of Jarasandha's. There was no doubt that it was aimed at humiliating the Yadavas of Mathura and in such a way to isolate them from the community of royal houses. It was, however, equally clear that any attempt on the part of the Yadavas of Mathura to intervene by force would prove disastrous.

Vikadru, the old minister, by nature cautious, was for pocketing the insult. Strengthening Mathura, he said, was a matter of pressing importance. Shanku, the general, though confessing their inability to summon sufficient strength, felt that if they took the challenge to their honour lying down the morale of the Yadavas would collapse. The younger group led by Brihadbala and Satyaki were all for taking strong steps to retrieve their honour. They wanted to go to Kundinapura uninvited and, if necessary, carry away the Princess by force; in three months' time, they said, they would develop sufficient strength for the purpose. Vasudeva, Akrura and the older chiefs were more inclined towards Vikadru. They disliked precipitate action.

At last King Ugrasena turned to Krishna who had remained silent all the time.

'Vaasudeva, you have not spoken a word. What do you think we should do?' asked the King.

'Lord, forgive me if I disagree with what has been said so far. King Bhishmaka is right in not inviting us,' said Krishna quietly.

Everyone looked up in surprise. Brihad's group repressed their indignation by sniffing with evident contempt.

'You want us to roll in the dust before Bhishmaka?' asked Brihadbala.

'There is no insult offered to us at all,' said Krishna quietly. 'In a *swayamvara* only kings and princes who could compete are generally invited. You, Lord, at your age, cannot be expected to compete and no Crown Prince has been installed by you so far.'

'What of it? Some of us have principalities of our own,' said Shanku.

'King Bhishmaka would want his daughter to marry not a chief but a king or a crown prince. Best of Kings, none among the Yadava chiefs has a place in the *swayamvara* of Bhishmaka's daughter,' said Krishna.

There was silence in the assembly. It was true there was no crown prince of Mathura who could attend the *swayamvara*.

'You, Krishna, are more than a crown prince,' said the King. 'I was willing to offer you the throne. You only have to agree, and I will hand over my kingship to you.'

Brihadbala looked angrily at Krishna, suspecting that he was manoeuvring for an offer of kingship again.

'I still think the same way, Lord,' said Krishna with a smile. 'Best of Kings, you have always been very kind to me, but I am content to be what I am, a *gopala*. But if you are pleased to listen to my advice, install a crown prince of your own choice,' said Krishna.

Everyone pricked up his ears. Krishna had found a solution.

'Lord, before we came from Gomantaka, and when you were doubtful whether we would ever return, you were thinking of installing Brihadbala as *yuvaraja*. Install him as soon as Uttarayana, the half-year sacred to the gods, begins,' said Krishna.

Brihadbala and his young friends gaped in delighted surprise. Some of the elders were lost in admiration at the noble gesture which Krishna was making; with rare statesmanship he was nipping the potential danger of an internal feud in the bud.

Akrura, however, opened his eyes still wider in surprise; he knew that Mathura would be doomed if ever Brihad became its king, but he had such confidence in Krishna that he kept his doubts to himself.

'Thereafter, Lord, you can send a message to Bhishmaka that an invitation be sent out to Prince Brihadbala,' resumed Krishna. 'If he refuses, it will be an insult; then, if the venerable Lord so decides, we can avenge the insult.'

'But that would mean a conflict of arms at Kundinapura,' Vasudeva raised a doubt.

'If you want to wipe out the insult, a conflict of arms is inevitable,' said Shanku, the general.

'Conflict is bound to follow,' said Satrajit who was spoiling for a fight. 'But it would not be the first *swayamvara* in which the bride was carried away by force. Even the venerable Bhishma of Hastinapura, the very image of Dharma, carried away three daughters of Kashiraja.'

'But if we are overwhelmed by Jarasandha's forces, what then?' asked Ugrasena.

Brihadbala's face fell.

'It is true that if Brother Brihadbala carries away the bride, he will have destroyed the prestige of Jarasandha and Bhishmaka,' said Krishna coolly.

'Suppose Brihadbala loses?' asked the cautious minister Vikadru.

'If we all back the attempt with our lives, we can't lose,' said Krishna. 'But, in the meantime, Brother Brihadbala and all our young chiefs will have to undergo intense training under Gurudeva Sandipani. Our chariot race will also give an opportunity to our chariot warriors to prepare for war.'

'And you?' Brihadbala interrupted the conversation by a question.

'Uddhava will go with you certainly. Perhaps my Big Brother may go. As for myself I am not sure whether carrying away a princess,—any woman for the matter of that—against her wishes, is Dharma. For the rest, if Brother Brihadbala wants me I will fight by his side,' said Krishna.

As the discussion ended, Brihadbala shuddered at the prospect which opened up before him. Suddenly all the arguments of Vikadru against a premature adventure assumed a new validity. 'What if I lose? Krishna is only playing a base trick,' he muttered to himself.

On their way home, Shvetaketu turned to Krishna. 'Vaasudeva, Princess Rukmini, even if Brihadbala wins, will not marry him.'

'Oh, if he carries her away by force, she may be reconciled,' said Krishna with a laugh. 'Many princesses have married that way and have been happy ever afterwards.'

'But what about you?' asked Shvetaketu.

'I won't wed a wife that way,' replied Krishna.

Immediately after the assembly of the chiefs was dissolved, Brihad sought his mother. She was in fact anxiously awaiting him to hear what had transpired in the assembly. Brihad was indignant.

'Mother, that cowherd has trapped us. He has finished me,' he said.

'How?' asked the mother anxiously.

'He has prepared the way for getting rid of me,' Brihad said helplessly.

He told Kamsaa all that had happened at the assembly and added, 'Krishna was very clever. He wanted me to be Crown Prince. What generosity! Then I was to become a hero by fighting Jarasandha and all his allies. What nobility! If necessary, he would come to my help and rob me of all credit. What selflessness!'

Kamsaa heard her favourite son with a smile.

'What did the noble lord, my venerable father, say about your being installed Crown Prince?' she asked.

'The lord consented, but that was because he agreed with Krishna that I was to force myself on Rukmini's *swayamvara,*' said Brihadbala.

'It is difficult to find a way out,' said Kamsaa after a while, her voice bearing the traces of her resentment that the injustice done to her had been aggravated. Then she added slowly as if thinking the matter over for herself. 'If you are installed as Crown Prince, you will be led to your death. If you refused to be installed Crown Prince, you will have lost all we have worked for.'

'..... and be dubbed as a coward all my life,' added Brihadbala. 'That idiot of a Satyaki is overjoyed at the prospect of my becoming Crown Prince and of emerging as a hero himself. He only wants to do something reckless, and does not care even if it ends in our being killed.'

'Let us think, dear child. I will find a way out,' Kamsaa assured him.

Brihadbala left his mother in distress and went to his wife, Vishakha. He would find her, he thought, a sympathetic spirit who, on hearing the danger to which he would be exposed, would dissolve in tears and perhaps show him some way.

Brihad told her about the choice that he was offered by the wicked Krishna. It was a trick played by the cowherd, he said, to get rid of him.

Vishakha was the daughter of Pradyota, the Andhaka Chief who commanded the armies of Mathura in the days of Kamsa. So, when she heard of the prospects of her husband leading an army against Jarasandha as Crown Prince, the martial instinct which she had inherited from her father was roused.

When Brihad explained to her the nature of Krishna's trap, she grew angry at his hesitation. It was a great opportunity which the gods had given him to prove his worth. He would vindicate the honour of the Yadavas; he would

abolish the wicked practice of bartering princesses for selfish alliances, so much in use; he would gain a fame which would extend to all the quarters of the earth. Mahadeva, the God of all gods, had given him the chance to become a hero, she said, such a chance as may not come to a warrior in a hundred lives. He should take the chance, she said. 'With Krishna, Balarama and Uddhava to help you, you will surely win.'

'You also want me to be killed,' said Brihadbala bitterly.

'With them nothing will happen to you. And my father always said that it is better to be the widow of a hero than the wife of a coward,' Vishakha said contemptuously, turning away from her husband and breaking into tears.

Next day Brihad went to his mother, who was in tears of frustration. She was born, she confessed, under the influence of sinister planets.

Brihad turned for advice to Satyaki, Virata, Satrajit and Bhadraka.

'Krishna is as clever as a fox. He has laid a trap for me.' And he told them all that he felt about what had happened in the assembly.

'Where is the trap?' asked Satyaki. 'He has really kept the promise he made to us. It gives us the opportunity we were waiting for — to carry away Bhishmaka's daughter before Jarasandha's very eyes. Oh, it would be great,' added Satyaki with enthusiasm.

'I am no coward,' assured Brihadbala. 'I am willing to die in battle, — where I have the chance of winning. But this is no heroism; it is lunacy.'

'But Krishna himself has promised to come with us,' said Satyaki. He was now dreaming of performing valorous deeds in this new adventure.

'He may come with us. But where is the certainty that he will help?' said Brihad doubtfully.

'Nonsense. He won't come with us to earn the disgrace of being defeated by Jarasandha,' said Satyaki.

'Jarasandha wants to kill him, not me, but he wants to hide behind me,' said Brihad.

'Even if we win by his help, we will get the credit for the victory,' said Virata.

'Suppose he did not survive the first onslaught,' Brihadbala interrupted.

'Oh, I see now,' said Satyaki contemptuously. 'You want to sit at home.'

'But this is not a risk, it is certain death,' said Virata. 'I agree with Brihad.'

Satyaki was angry now. 'What has come upon you all? First, we took a pledge from Krishna to see Brihad installed as Crown Prince. He only made one condition: the *yuvaraja* must stand by Dharma. It is now our Dharma to vindicate the honour of the Yadavas and prevent a fraudulent *swayamvara*. Brihadbala, you want to be Crown Prince, but don't want to accept the responsibilities of being one.'

'But this.....,' said Brihad.

'I don't understand you, Brihadbala,' said Satyaki, whose blood was now up. 'And I don't understand you, Virata, either. We want to rule Mathura, but take no risks, even when Krishna risks his own life for you. We are a pack of cowards, if that is what we want. We must keep to the promise. Brihad should become the Crown Prince, vindicate the honour of the Yadavas and proceed to Kundinapura.'

'I think we are properly trapped,' said Virata. 'But we can't get out of it — trap or no trap.'

'I wish you had let me finish Krishna — I was quite ready,' said Bhadraka.

'I don't want to be a victim of Krishna's wiles,' said Brihadbala.

'We shall not be the victims of your faint-heartedness either. If you want to be the Crown Prince, lead us to

honour. If you can't, don't aspire to anything.' And Satyaki stormed out of the place where they had met.

It was a terrible situation, Brihad felt. He must be led to the sacrificial altar like a goat, fragrant with sandal-paste and adorned with flowers. He must go along bleating; no, he would not have the courage even to bleat. He must wear a smile and behave like a hero if his throat was slit by Jarasandha's sword.

Why should the Yadavas be so foolish as to feel insulted? It was Bhishmaka's business to invite whomsoever he liked to his daughter's *swayamvara.* He was quite right; he did not invite the Yadavas because Ugrasena was too old and there was no Crown Prince; because that's right —according to ancient traditions no Yadava can be a king!

Yes, Bhishmaka was right. Yadu, their ancestor, had a curse put upon him by his father Yayati that his sons should never be kings. Ugrasena was called king by courtesy; even he had not been installed by the divine ritual of *aindra abhishek,* which vested sovereignty in a man and made him the counterpart of the gods on earth. And Mathura had no king and therefore could not have a Crown Prince. That was why Krishna had cleverly declined to be a king.

It was wrong, all wrong to go against ancient traditions. Kamsa tried to flout it and met with a ghastly end. His mother, Kamsaa, was carried away by the foolish ambition of being a king's mother.

His friends were selfish; they wanted to rule Mathura through him. And Satyaki was always itching for a fight. Vishakha, his wife, was a foolish woman; she preferred a husband heroically dead to a husband happily alive; she had been badly taught by her father.

They were all short-sighted; they had no idea how powerful Jarasandha was. They were just grown-up children, fascinated by a foolish adventure. His friends were not even well-trained warriors. Bhadraka was just a bully. They were idling away their time in talk, gambling and drinking. That was why they did not like the

strict discipline required of those joining in the chariot race. In a real battle they would just be wiped out — or, worse, would just have to speed away like flies. Krishna was right in insisting on training them well. He had a plan to make Mathura fit for war. He, Brihad, had never thought of that; he himself was not ready, as his brother Uddhava was.

But Krishna was cunning. He had laid a trap for him, Brihad, his elder cousin. It was very wrong of him to behave so vilely toward a senior Vrishni. Well, he, Brihad, would outwit him.

The wily must be met by wiles, Brihad thought. He would lead Krishna into the trap he himself had laid. It would mean his certain death. If he, Brihad, was to die, he would choose his own manner of death, and not leave it to Krishna to decide how it should be. Krishna could only be outwitted by a shrewder wit. And he would show his friends such as Satyaki, who wanted to be heroes, what fools they were.

Brihadbala felt courageous. At night he went to his grandfather, the King, and humbly prostrated himself before him.

'Noble Lord, forgive me for disturbing you at this time of the day. But I want you, Lord, to listen to me on a very important matter,' said Brihad.

'Yes, what is it?' asked the King in a tired voice.

'Lord, Krishna was very very generous when he suggested that I should be installed as the *yuvaraja*. But I have thought over the matter carefully. Krishna, as the real saviour of the Yadavas, has performed miraculous feats from his infancy. If he is not a god, he is god-like in every way. Unaided, he and Balarama have routed Jarasandha and his friends. He is the noblest of us all, the most heroic, the most devoted to Dharma. In Mathura, after you, Lord, he is the first of Yadavas. It would be wrong of me to take advantage of his goodness and displace him,' said Brihad.

'Oh! Oh!' said the old King, surprised at the sanity of his grandson, 'are you sure?'

'I am speaking the truth, Grandfather. Krishna alone can bring back our ancient glory. I will always remain loyal to him — and never, never will I do him an injustice,' said Brihad lashing himself into ecstatic praise.

'You don't want to be Crown Prince?' asked the King, breathing a sigh of relief, for in his heart of hearts, he never considered Brihad fit to succeed him in the rulership of Mathura.

'I want Krishna to go to Kundinapura to vindicate our honour. He is a hero, Lord, and can do it,' said Brihad.

'I am very glad, my child, that you have begun to understand things rightly. I will revise my decision to install you as the Crown Prince,' said the King cheerfully.

'He will go to Kundinapura and I am sure he will triumph,' said Brihad maliciously.

'I know he will,' replied the King confidently.

34

SHAIBYA SPURNS SHVETAKETU

The whole night Kamsaa was thinking of a way out. Something had to be done — but by someone else.

The next day she went to Vasudeva's mansion and, after paying her respects to Mother Devaki, met Shaibya as she was offering worship to her uncle's image.

In a few days Kamsaa had wormed herself into Shaibya's heart and, by affectionate encouragement, had induced the younger woman to unburden herself to her. Shaibya, in need of a sympathetic listener, had poured out to Kamsaa the tale of all she had lived for and all she had suffered; of how godlike her uncle was; of how he was brutally killed by Krishna; and of how her life had been ruined by him with the assistance of Shvetaketu, who, in spite of her love for him, had turned traitor.

Kamsaa was not merely a sympathetic listener, she was working for a partnership in distress. She shed copious tears, telling the younger woman of how Krishna had killed his enemies one after the other; how he had brutally assassinated her brother, Kamsa; and how all her misery had come from that common enemy.

In this new-born sympathy between the two, Shaibya's sullenness was replaced by a concentrated hatred of Krishna.

This morning Kamsaa took Shaibya to the Palace and, after the usual exchange of grievances, let her know all about the calamity which was soon to overtake her. As she began her new tale of woe, she burst out sobbing. It was a terrible situation. Krishna, the wicked, had not only deprived her son of his rightful position as Crown Prince, which, her father, the King, wanted to confer upon him, but had now laid a trap for the poor boy. He had induced

the King to install him as his heir only to send him to certain death !

Piteously she complained to the gods about the fate that had overtaken her owing to the wickedness of one man. Her husband, Devabhaga, and her eldest son, Chitraketu, were too good-natured; they never took an interest in anything; they just obeyed the head of the family, Vasudeva. Uddhava, her youngest son, was the worst; he was a slave of Krishna, just a tool — an estimate which Shaibya heartily endorsed.

Kamsaa, with an eye to the impression she was creating on Shaibya, went into hysterics. She wound up by clinging to the younger woman.

'Oh God of all gods ! When is Gopala going to die ? Oh, gods ! Why did you frustrate my poor Shaibya's attempt to kill him in Karavirapura ?' with eyes flooded with tears, she asked the silent gods.

And Shaibya, forgetting her own grief, gave her solace. 'Aunt, don't you worry. The man who killed my Vaasudeva will meet his fate. I am sure of it.'

The whole night Shaibya worked herself up to a hysterical desire to take revenge on Krishna. Her uncle, Shrigalava Vaasudeva, she felt, was calling upon her to make an offering which would give him happiness in the next world.

After returning from the river, where she had accompanied Mother Devaki and other ladies for her bathe, she worshipped the image of her uncle. She placed her head before it and cried for strength to accomplish her task. 'Your murderer must die, my Vaasudeva,' she prayed.

From the next room came the tinkling of a little bell. Mother Devaki was offering *arti* before her Bala-Krishna. Trivakra followed it by a song in praise of Krishna to the accompaniment of wooden clappers. 'These women are filled with Krishna to the point of madness,' Shaibya thought. 'They just live in him — the murderer of my uncle.'

Shaibya's senses, for the moment, became acute. She heard Vasudeva's voice from the courtyard clearly. He was asking the charioteer to get the chariot ready. He was evidently going to Guru Sandipani's camp to fetch Krishna, as he usually did. Krishna had gone there to join the training of young Yadava chiefs for the chariot race.

Father Vasudeva foolishly doted on Krishna, she thought. When Krishna returned with him and others, the menfolk would have their midday meal. The Mother would serve them with her own hands; that was her privilege as the eldest lady of the family.

Strange people these, Shaibya thought. They behaved in a way unfamiliar to her, in a smooth, well-regulated way without wrangling or roughness. The whole family — so different from the families she had known in Karavirapura — was knit together as one. Its members paid unfailing respect to the Father and the Mother : no youngster ever spoke in the presence of his elders except in a humble whisper. Even Kamsaa and Brihadbala, in spite of the grievances they harboured, never departed from the Aryan code of manners.

For a moment, the image of Krishna — her enemy — stood before Shaibya. His smiling face, his expressive eyes, his graceful face and body, his imperturbable calmness, his universal kindliness set him apart from others, and yet he was so modest and courteous.

Mother Devaki said Krishna was a god but, unlike her uncle, he never felt, spoke or behaved as if he knew he was one. He was so very different from everyone else. They said that when he was a child the women of Vrindavan did nothing but sing his praises and dance with him. Here he was friendly to everyone, even to the lowliest, never selfish, never rude. Even the dependents and the servants in the house felt he was one of them.

To Shaibya also, he was what he said he wanted to be, her elder brother. The hypocrite ! In spite of her bitter words, never so much as by a flicker of his eyelids had he shown his irritation. He really tried to please her; on many days, he had brought her what she liked to have.

Vasudeva's family lived in a strange world — so different from Karavirapura's, where the members of the royal family shouted at each other, or tried to behave rudely to each other. Only Kamsaa and her son in their hearts agreed with her that Krishna was a wicked man who had taken innocent lives; no one else.

Shaibya hated him. She had now brought with her a knife which she had found lying about in Kamsaa's rooms. She had just picked it up. Kamsaa had not even by chance seen her doing so; perhaps she had knowingly turned her face away, not wanting to see.

Yes, she hated Krishna above everything else! She would now wait for him. As was his habit, he would come in the evening today or tomorrow.

Shaibya went to Mother Devaki, as she moved about giving instructions to the women of the family for preparing the midday meal. She gave her help to the Mother in the way she usually did. She must not arouse any suspicion that she wanted to do something out of the way.

The courtyard was now filled with the usual noises, the rumbling of chariots, the neighing of horses, the laughter of men ready to take their midday meal. She could hear the voices distinctly. Among them she could distinguish Krishna's quiet, soft voice — and another's which she knew so well.

Yes, it was Shvetaketu's voice. She had already learnt that he had arrived the day before. He had come — he, whom she had once loved and who had betrayed her and her Vaasudeva. She felt excited; his voice was once dear to her. Often she had dreamt of marrying him with the blessing of her uncle, but only when he had completely dedicated himself to Shrigalava Vaasudeva, and not before. And Shvetaketu had failed her — betrayed her for Krishna — the ungrateful wretch!

The menfolk were now filing in for their meal. The Father took his usual seat — in the middle, as the head of the family; his brothers sat next to him in order of seniority. Next to them sat the younger members of the

family. Krishna sat among them, with Uddhava. He was such a cunning fellow that he tried to be correct in all such matters. Shvetaketu, though now an Acharya, and entitled to a seat with Gargacharya and other Acharyas, had also chosen to seat himself by his side.

She had not seen Shvetaketu for some months. He had grown well-knit and muscular. His matted hair, his short black beard, the triple mark of sacred ashes on his forehead, the girdle of antelope skin, so characteristic of an Acharya, set off his highly intelligent face, beaming with smiles, to great advantage.

His eyes were searching for hers. Their eyes met. She wanted to be cold and distant, but she was so agitated that she could not help flashing a friendly glance at him. When he smiled at her, she did not want to smile in response; he was a betrayer. But he was the only person — after her uncle — whom she had loved; and within the limits of modesty rigidly imposed in the presence of elders in this strange family, she let her lips part a little. 'Oh! Lord Vaasudeva, if Shvetaketu was not such a slave of Krishna, and my Uncle were alive, we should have been in Karavirapura and so very happy,' she muttered.

Like other women of the family, she began to serve food to the menfolk. As she came near the seats of Krishna and Shvetaketu, her heart pounded with excitement. She had decided to kill one of them that night; the other was hers no longer. Her heart-throbs were so violent that her hands trembled as she served them.

'Now, little sister, listen. I am going to bring this venerable Acharya when you have rested after the meal,' Krishna said in a whisper, his eyes dancing mischievously.

Shaibya was angry — very angry. She was inclined to fling the *thali,* from which she was serving, at his head. But he was smiling and Shvetaketu was blushing. He always had the habit of blushing whenever she spoke to him in the old days. He loved her still — the wretch — in spite of having betrayed her.

She summoned up all her strength and passed on to serving the others in the usual way. Her heart, however,

was still pounding against her sides. She felt as if she would fall down.

The meal over, the menfolk retired for a little rest and the womenfolk sat down for their meal. Shaibya could hardly eat anything; she was so excited.

After the meal, she tried to snatch a short sleep as usual, but she could not close her eyes; waiting to meet the enemy and the betrayer gave her a poignant ache.

She heard some footfalls and sat up, her heart again pounding in her ears. It was only Trivakra who had come to fetch her — this willing slave of Krishna, doing his bidding all the time. She got up, arranged her dress and ornaments, and followed her to the rear courtyard, where, under a mango tree, Krishna was waiting for her, Shvetaketu by his side.

This was Krishna's favourite mango tree, she knew. During the day, when free, he sat there, his friend Uddhava by his side. At night he slept here and so did Uddhava.

Except during the rains or when the night was very cold, the unmarried youngsters slept in the compound in the open. She knew the spot where Krishna slept at night. Here it was that she had decided to come after midnight.

'Now, sister, I have brought you my friend and tutor, the valiant and learned Shvetaketu,' said Krishna with mock solemnity. 'He has already founded an *ashram* at Kundinapura for training young Bhoja warriors. He has come to me as your elder brother to ask my permission to marry you — and soon. I find him a hopeless fellow. He says he must have a wife; that it must be you and that he will not wait!

She shot an angry glance at Krishna. She was in no mood to talk about marriage and that too in the presence of this betrayer!

'Now Trivakra and I have many other things to do; so we will depart,' Krishna continued in the same mocking vein. 'And Shvetaketu, if there is any difficulty, you can run away with her. Then as her elder brother, it will be my privilege to cut your throat and bring her back. But

I promise you, I will not do it,' he said laughingly as he went obliging Trivakra to go with him.

Shaibya, sullen and defiant, stood in front of the stone platform which surrounded the tree, a little away from Shvetaketu. For a while neither of them spoke.

'Shaibya, Krishna has told you the truth. I could not live without you. Day and night I have longed for you. I have come to make you my wife and take you to Kundinapura,' said Shvetaketu.

'You are telling a lie,' Shaibya burst out. 'You have come to tell your beloved friend that King Bhishmaka has decided to hold a *swayamvara* to which he has not been invited.'

'You seem to be well-informed about the nature of my mission, Shaibya,' Shvetaketu explained. 'I have come to tell him of a vast conspiracy hatched by Emperor Jarasandha to destroy him and the Yadavas of Mathura.'

'It would serve him right if he were destroyed,' interjected Shaibya. 'Why are you so interested in this friend of yours? You betrayed me for him; now you betray your master, Bhishmaka, to serve him. Is there no limit to your treachery?' asked Shaibya hotly.

'Shaibya, Shaibya! Why do you go on misunderstanding us?' asked Shvetaketu sadly. 'Why do you judge us from the standards of Karavirapura?'

'Our standards were better than yours,' retorted Shaibya.

'May be, but they were different. Here the world of the Aryas is very different. We live for Dharma here. All our ancestors lived and died so that Dharma should prevail on earth and kings do not transgress its bounds,' said Shvetaketu.

'Had my uncle no Dharma? Has Jarasandha no Dharma?' she asked.

'You are right to ask that. Jarasandha has no Dharma,' replied Shvetaketu. 'For many many years Jarasandha has disregarded Dharma — molested women, en-

slaved men, spread carnage and uprooted *ashrams.* Now a liberator has come.'

'This Govinda — this cowherd — is your saviour, who killed my uncle and his own!' sarcastically interjected Shaibya.

'You will not understand us unless you outgrow the notions which you cherished at Karavirapura,' Shvetaketu said helplessly. 'The power of the gods and the happiness of men rest on Dharma. Dharma is not the will of kings; they are only the instruments of Dharma. Both Kamsa and your uncle defied Dharma and imposed their will on those who stood for the Law. And Jarasandha too believes in no law,' said Shvetaketu. Then he added with subdued enthusiasm, 'Dharma must be re-established.'

'And now you are helping your friend to establish Dharma by destroying Jarasandha?' asked Shaibya.

'No, he is only bringing Jarasandha to the ways of Dharma,' replied Shvetaketu.

'Suppose your friend does not live long enough to do it, then?' Shaibya asked.

'It cannot be,' Shvetaketu said with confidence. 'Sage Narada and the Best of Munis, Veda Vyasa, have said that he has come to uproot *adharma.* Gurudeva and Acharya Garga have spent years watching him grow. And we are pledged to him for life.'

'So, that is the truth,' Shaibya stated triumphantly. 'Then why tell me the falsehood that you came here to ask me to marry you?' she asked indignantly.

'Oh, Shaibya, why do you refuse to understand things in the right way? There is a crisis developing and I am in a hurry to take you to Kundinapura so that we can play our part in it,' said Shvetaketu.

'So you want me to be a tool in some sinister design of your friend's,' sneered Shaibya.

'Ask yourself, Shaibya, whether I am capable of any sinister design,' said Shvetaketu, moved to high emotion. 'I have worshipped the very dust on which you walked

since the day I met you in Prabhasa. I would have married you any time if you had only agreed. I love you still. I adore you. I long for you. And if you were not ready to marry me, I would have patiently waited for the day when the God of Death came to relieve me from your thraldom. Who knows? Even in the Land of the Manes I might have waited for you.'

'But now you cannot, because your friend wants me,' interrupted Shaibya contemptuously.

'I cannot wait,' Shvetaketu said with firmness. 'I want us to do the greatest thing in our lives.'

'What is this great thing in which you want me to help you?' asked Shaibya again with a sneer.

'I want to defeat Jarasandha's plan to form an alliance with Chedi to destroy Krishna,' said Shvetaketu. 'To achieve this end we must prevent the marriage of Rukmini and Shishupala, the Prince of Chedi.'

'Trivakra once told me that the Princess was in love with your friend,' remarked Shaibya.

'She is madly in love still,' said Shvetaketu. 'But I would like to break up this false *swayamvara* first. Next I would like you to help me so that the Princess may marry Krishna,' pleaded Shvetaketu.

'But if she is married to someone else, in the meantime?' asked Shaibya.

'I know her well. She is a very strong-willed young woman. If she has made up her mind, which I think she has, she will prefer to die rather than marry anyone else,' said Shvetaketu.

'All women say so at one time or another, and then marry those whom their parents want them to,' she said contemptuously.

'Please do not say that you might marry someone else than me,' said Shvetaketu in dead earnestness. 'Shaibya, let us forget the past and begin the future. I want you — as I have always wanted you — and I wish you now to secure the end I have in view.'

'Would Krishna agree to marry Rukmini?' she asked. The intriguing situation began to interest Shaibya.

'That is for you, his sister, to manage,' said Shvetaketu, for the first time dissolving into a smile.

'Now listen to me, Shvetaketu,' said Shaibya defiantly. 'I hate your Krishna. I would not do anything to help him. If I can, I will see him — this murderer of my uncle — dead first. I do not wish to marry you; you betrayed my uncle and me. And I will never — never, never — marry you in order to become a tool of Krishna's. Now, go,' she said.

'Shaibya, you are carried away by a blind hatred.' Shvetaketu rose from the platform and stood facing Shaibya. 'I will not accept a "no". I am staying here for a few days and am determined to take you away to Kundinapura, even if I have to carry you away by force.'

'Go,' she shouted, as she turned her back on Shvetaketu.

'I will go now, but I will come back every day till you change your mind,' said Shvetaketu in reply.

35

SHAIBYA'S REVENGE

After Shvetaketu had left, Shaibya sat down on the platform, dazed. Born and brought up in a mountain fortress among people whose interests were narrow and standards of life crude, she had no idea that there was a vast world in which men lived by a higher law which could not be measured by the will of kings. Her mind went back to the learned Acharyas who would rather stay in hell than accept the favours of her uncle and forswear Dharma. This world was indeed strange in which Krishna, who she thought a murderer, was looked upon as a saviour.

No doubt there was something about him which she could not understand. Having become the master of Karavirapura, he had handed it over to Shakradeva, her uncle's son; no one in Karavirapura would have thought such generosity possible. He had even rescued her from the humiliation of serving Queen Padmavati; but for him she would have been driven to commit suicide.

Trivakra came with a *thali* in her hands containing sweets and ornaments.

'Mother Devaki has sent these presents. She has just learnt that you and Shvetaketu are now betrothed to each other. She is so happy,' Trivakra said with a sly look.

'Who says I am going to marry Shvetaketu ?' Shaibya asked indignantly.

'Krishna told her,' replied Trivakra.

'Krishna, Krishna, always Krishna ! I am not going to marry Shvetaketu. Why does Krishna want to dispose of me like that ? I hate him,' Shaibya said.

Trivakra lost her temper. 'I am sick of hearing that you hate Krishna,' she said in exasperation. 'I want to give you a bit of my mind, Shaibya. All these days I have borne your sneers and outbursts quietly, but you cannot always behave like a petulant child. You are a woman, and the sooner you hear the truth, the better for you.' Trivakra's anger was now aroused. 'The truth is you want Krishna to marry you.'

'I, marry Krishna ! Have you gone mad, Trivakra ?' asked Shaibya, taken aback at the insinuation.

'No, you know what you want; you have your designs on Krishna,' said Trivakra, fixing her angry looks on Shaibya. 'You hate him because in your heart of hearts you feel that he will never marry you.'

'You are wicked, Trivakra; I never had such an idea,' said Shaibya, quailing before the towering rage into which Trivakra had lashed herself.

'No, I have not served in the Palace from my childhood for nothing,' said Trivakra with disgust. 'I have given you the poison; now swallow it and digest it as best you can. Either you remain content with being his sister, or lose him for ever,' Trivakra said menacingly.

Shaibya also was so choked with anger that for the moment she was struck dumb.

'You have been listening to Aunt Kamsaa too often,' continued Trivakra. 'She can poison anyone's ears, drip, drip, drip. Listen to me : shut your ears when she speaks. Do you hear ? That is my advice to you,' Trivakra said and planted the *thali* of sweets in front of Shaibya with a clatter.

Once Trivakra's fury was let loose, there was no arresting it. 'And if you meet your beloved Aunt, tell her that if she ever wants to see her son Crown Prince of Mathura, it will only be in the way Krishna has proposed. He cannot be the *yuvaraja* of the Yadavas by hiding his face in his mother's lap.' Giving this parting shot, she left.

Shaibya shuddered at the base suspicion that Trivakra had harboured about her intentions. First, she felt she

wanted to marry Shvetaketu. But suddenly a thought struck her. What if her uncle had willingly given her to Krishna ! Would she have taken him as a husband ?

'No, no, my Uncle, my Lord God, I will not be untrue to you. Krishna shall die,' she exclaimed. Then she brought out the knife which she had concealed in a pile of her spare clothes, looked at it for some time, and put it back.

'At midnight today,' she whispered to herself.

Trivakra had given her a rude shock. Devaki loved her, Trivakra served her loyally, Vasudeva treated her affectionately. Not because of her uncle but because they loved Krishna. She was in a strange world, which only treated her well, because the cowherd wanted it so.

Then she fell to thinking and became drowsy. She felt as if she was awake in a strange sort of way. She lost the thread of things. She was drifting....drifting in space ....and the day was past, the night had come. It was now midnight. She knew that she had to offer the sacrifice to satisfy her uncle. He was waiting for her to do her duty — avenge his death, kill his murderer. She had no other interest in life now — her only interest was to placate the spirit of her departed uncle. In the other world where he was, he would only be happy if the obsequial offering of Krishna were made to him.

She took the knife in her hands, and hid it in the folds of her *sari.* She went to the courtyard in the rear. She reached there without knowing how. The night was dark. She crept slowly towards the mango tree which she knew so well and under which *he* slept.

In the starlight, she saw her enemy lying asleep, his head upon his arms, a smile on his lips. He would go on smiling always, even in death. But soon the smiling face would turn to ashes.

There was no use in waiting — no use even in looking at him. His handsome face might make her weak. A curious memory stirred in her. Someone had said that she, Shaibya, wanted to marry him. She would never want to

marry the murderer of her uncle! If things had been different....Oh! But her uncle was in the other world, wanting to be offered the sacrifice to propitiate him.

She raised the knife....then thrust it once, twice or thrice in the body which lay before her. There was no resistance, no cry, no blood. But she did not pause to see what had happened. She threw away the knife and fled.

And the darkness around began to clear. She went into the house. Mother Devaki — who had loved her in spite of her bad temper — lay dead on the ground, the tiny golden image of her Bala-Krishna hugged to her heart. She immediately knew why the Mother had died. Because she — Shaibya — had done the ugly deed!

She saw Vasudeva, withered and shrunk, roaming through the house with a forlorn look. He was murmuring: 'My Krishna, my Krishna!' She fled from him. She knew it was because of the deed she had done!

Then she heard a thin childish voice piteously crying 'Brother! Govinda! Brother!' Yes, she recognised the voice; it was that of his baby sister, the plump, ever jovial Subhadra, who loved to nestle in his arms all the time. Yes, Subhadra's heart was breaking.... 'Brother! Brother!' came the mournful cry. She, Shaibya, could hear it no longer; she stopped her ears and ran.

She saw dead bodies lying about. She bent over them. Uddhava lay dead; he had died of the shock. Shvetaketu had stabbed himself; she knew why he had done so. As she stepped near him, he lifted himself and gazed at her with loving eyes. 'You, Shaibya, you of all others!.... You killed my beloved Krishna and so killed me.'

She fled from them, a nameless terror in her heart. She felt as if a hundred demons were pursuing her. She ran to the Palace. Perhaps she could find protection there. But horror was there too. Near its steps lay the huddled figures of the King and some of the leading Yadavas.

She ran to the banks of the river, Yamuna. It was the river in which he came to swim everyday. There she heard a tumult of voices. Men and women were tearing

their hair, beating their breasts. She had done the deed and they were cursing her. She turned away from them and fled.

Kamsaa alone stood apart from others, smiling at her ....no, she was not smiling, she was grimacing — as if mad !

Under a tree Balarama was standing, leaning on his plough. He stood alone, a tragic figure, eyeing her with smothered anger. His great eyes followed her as if they were arrows of fire.

As she ran away, she heard little children....crying, 'Krishna, where are you ?' She heard people wailing from a distance, 'Ha Krishna, Govinda ! Ha Natha !' and the wails were echoed from different quarters. She recognised one voice among them ; it was Uncle Akrura's, who, she had heard, had seen Krishna as God.

She was fleeing, fleeing from a nameless curse. And her feet were now tired. Her voice was choked. She stumbled as she ran along deserted streets. Now the sky was lit by a red glow. Houses were in flames. She felt the God of gods, the Trident Wielder, had opened His third eye in anger and the three worlds were on fire.

She wanted to get out of this accursed city. She rushed to the city walls. They were no longer what they had been, firm and well built, but were tumbling down stone by stone.

'Krishna is dead,' came a harsh voice from beyond the walls. She felt, somehow, whose voice it was. It was Jarasandha's. It was triumphant. 'Dharma is dead,' came the echo from all the ten parts of the earth.

She was standing alone somewhere, on some heights, looking down upon the heap of ruins which was once Mathura. And she saw the Acharyas her uncle had imprisoned with Gargacharya and Sandipani, as they were being led forward in chains. They were walking slowly and the light in their eyes was extinguished.

That was right. It was the command of her uncle, Shrigalava Vaasudeva. He was now happy once more, for

his spirit had been propitiated by the blood of his murderer.

But she herself felt suffocated. Where was Krishna? She could only remember one thing; she had done it, the dark deed. But she had forgotten what it was.

She saw a funeral pyre at a distance, flames were leaping out of it, the red smoke trailed from it to the sky. A beautiful princess, with *kumkum* on her forehead and tresses flying, wild with grief, was climbing it. Who was she? She, Shaibya, had never seen her before, but somehow she seemed to know her....yes, she knew the princess. She had forgotten her name. She was the one who had vowed not to marry anyone but Krishna. And, God of all gods, she, Shaibya, had been asked by Shvetaketu to help in effecting her marriage to Krishna. But now the princess was dying; because she, Shaibya, had done the deed.

They all wanted Krishna. They could not live without him. And he was gone. It was no use her living either. He was gone. Shvetaketu had gone with him. There was no one left — neither lover nor brother — for her. Yes, she had done it, the dark deed. The three worlds were deluged with blood. She was the wicked one who had killed Dharma.

She looked at her hands. They were dripping with blood. She felt choked. She tried to cry out, but could not. She was trembling in every limb.

A chant charged with devotion came floating on the air: 'Ha Natha, Narayana, Vaasudeva.' Yes, it was Mother Devaki's voice. But, strange that she had a voice; Shaibya had seen her lying dead.

Yes, the Mother always chanted these words when she prayed to the golden image. But there was now no Vaasudeva.

A terror gripped her heart. She tried to shout, but in vain. She felt suffocated. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, her hands trembling, her mouth trying to form the word 'Vaasudeva', but in vain.

'Did I frighten you, Shaibya?' It was a familiar voice — yes, all too familiar. But where did it come from? The voice had been hushed for ever. She opened her eyes; she did not know where she was.

The rays of the setting sun were streaming through the door. In this golden glow she saw the yellow cloth; the garland of flowers; the peacock feather; the body of perfect grace; the smile that never faded; the eyes of affectionate understanding. And in his arms nestled that plump, ever jovial Subhadra.

Behind him stood Shvetaketu.

'Krishna,' she said, half in fright, half in relief. She put her hand to her head, which felt like splitting.

'Yes, sister. What is it?'

Though she heard his loving voice, she could not look up at that glowing face. She was not sure whether what she saw was not an illusion. She could not stand up, her legs trembled so. 'Oh! I myself have done the dark deed,' ran the refrain echoed in the corridors of her mind.

But now she knew. He was there in flesh and blood, living as he alone knew how to.

'Shaibya, wake up,' the voice came speaking with authority. 'I am Krishna, wake up.'

Wild-eyed, she woke up and, driven by a sudden impulse, laid her head on his feet. She tried to cling to them.

'Shaibya, don't cry. I am here,' he said, and there was solace in his words.

He placed Subhadra on the ground. He sat down near her, took her head in his hands, lifted her hair from her eyes, and with his right hand smoothed the hair on her head.

'Shaibya, don't cry. Smile, I ask you to,' came the soft affectionate voice. 'When would you like to be married?'

Subhadra came toddling to her and fell on her neck, pulling her hair and saying, 'Sister Shaibya.'

'Govinda, Govinda,' Shaibya said, still unable to restrain her sobs. Then she whispered as she laid her head on his shoulder, 'Please, please, Govinda, don't ask me just now. I beg of you. I will do whatever else you ask me to.'

'Take your own time, you shall marry when and whom you like, Shaibya.'

'Lord, Lord,' uttered Shaibya, half crying, half laughing as she again clung to his feet.

36

CONQUEST OF HATE

Trivakra had not been brought up among palace intrigues in vain. She had sharp ears and eyes. Her nose could smell all secrets. Her tongue could soothe or flatter, overawe or sting whenever the occasion arose. Now as the right hand of Mother Devaki — soft, kindly and devout — she had assumed charge of the affairs of the large patriarchal family of Vasudeva with his five brothers, their wives, children, grandchildren and a host of collaterals and dependents.

However, as Trivakra's principal interests were centred in Krishna, she had been hostile to Shaibya from the beginning. She did not like her glamorous beauty ; there were too many young men in the family. She hated her violent moods ; bad-mannered women had no place in Mother Devaki's quiet household. And above all, she abhorred her for the way in which she reviled Krishna, her beloved. She was not a good woman, this dark beauty whom Trivakra liked to refer to in her heart as 'the dark one'.

Trivakra had also been uneasy about Krishna. From the day Krishna had killed Kamsa and she had met Rukmini, she had selected her as his future bride. Since then she had encouraged Rukmini in her fascination for Krishna, and kept her informed of the achievements of Krishna whenever an opportunity was available.

The unexpected arrival of the Princess of Karavirapura with her beauty was rather dangerous, Trivakra thought. It was true that Shaibya could never see Krishna without upbraiding him. But with a woman's native shrewdness, she knew that violent outbursts of temper

often conceal an all-demanding attraction. She did not like Krishna's attitude either. He paid more attention to her than she had known him do to any other woman. He saw her almost every day ; bore her angry or hateful remarks with an indulgent smile ; and spoke to her with a warmth which this strange woman, with her mad ravings over a dead uncle, did not deserve. She, Trivakra, wanted to do something before all this attention ripened into the final choice by Krishna of Shaibya as a wife.

When Uddhava arrived in Mathura, Trivakra closely observed his attitude towards Shaibya. It was studiedly distant, with a touch of compelling self-restraint. He would not so much as look at Shaibya ; whenever she came within sight, he averted his gaze. And one day when Krishna dropped a remark about Uddhava, she guessed what the trouble was.

'Uddhava has changed completely, lord,' she had remarked as if casually.

'Don't worry about him, Trivakra. He will be all right soon,' Krishna had replied, taking her into confidence by a distant hint.

She had plied Uddhava with questions, all apparently casual, about how Shaibya had come to Mathura, but she could see that Uddhava was unwilling to talk about her freely or even to mention her by name.

Trivakra made a shrewd guess and in her meddling way tried to bring Uddhava and Shaibya together. But every time she praised Shaibya, her beauty and her nature, Uddhava winced and turned away in stern silence.

Trivakra made up her mind. To save Krishna, Uddhava must be made to wed Shaibya. There had been talks in the family about a marriage for Uddhava, but nobody was serious about it, because Uddhava had gone on his wanderings.

Trivakra with her best winning smile had taken advantage of quiet moments to make Shaibya speak about Uddhava. What she said was encouraging. 'Uddhava is

a very very kind man. But for him I would have died on the way,' she had once said. 'I felt unhappy when he left with Kukudmin,' Shaibya had said on another occasion and added: 'And now he dances attendance upon Krishna all the time, and has no time even to talk to me.' This was enough encouragement to Trivakra, but she found Uddhava absolutely un-co-operative. In fact, Uddhava, on the pretext of being busy, made it a point to be away from home throughout the day.

Things were getting out of hand, and Trivakra never liked that to happen. Then Shvetaketu arrived with a message to her from Rukmini and she found that Shvetaketu was bent on marrying Shaibya. In a couple of days she in her best insinuating manner wormed out the whole story of his relations with Shaibya.

Now that she saw her way, she casually told Uddhava that Shvetaketu had come to Mathura to marry Shaibya. Uddhava heard it in an apparently detached manner, but she could see that her shaft had found the target she was aiming at.

Then she let fall to Shvetaketu, again in the most casual manner, that Uddhava wanted to marry Shaibya, and that Shaibya wanted him to do so. But both were unhappy, because they did not want to be untrue to him, Shvetaketu.

This news came as a blow to Shvetaketu. He had loved Shaibya with a single-minded devotion. He had looked upon her as his, worshipped her as a divinity, spent years in the hope of making her his wife. He had counted on her help in persuading Krishna to wed Rukmini and thereby frustrate Jarasandha in his design to isolate Mathura. He felt crushed.

Shvetaketu's heart was shot through with a pang of jealousy. Uddhava of all people to supplant him and marry Shaibya! It was a cruel blow. Life now had no charm for him, nor his ambitions any meaning. However, Shvetaketu was noble-minded. With a bleeding heart, he tried to look at the situation charitably. Kamadeva, the God of Love, was irresistible. He made men and women

mad. Shaibya was lovely and impetuous and disliked him, Shvetaketu, for failing her at Karavirapura. Uddhava was self-restrained, honest, the soul of nobility. If they were attracted to each other, it was nobody's fault except that of the God of Love who shot his flower-tipped arrows regardless of consequences.

True, he loved Shaibya above all things. That, he thought, made it imperative that he should think only of Shaibya's happiness. He was finished for life; all that was left to him was to remain an unwed *brahmachari* to the end of his life; it was all the more reason why he should make her happy. And she could never find a nobler husband than Uddhava; perhaps in his quiet understanding way, he would make a better husband to Shaibya than Shvetaketu himself could be. He also understood now the sort of sadness which had settled on Uddhava. He had become reserved, distant towards him. True, he was making a constant effort to be as scrupulously cordial as before, but the old spontaneity had gone.

Uddhava was a great fellow, thought Shvetaketu, true in speech and action. Evidently he had made up his mind to sacrifice his love for Shaibya for the sake of a friend. It was all wrong. If Uddhava wanted to marry Shaibya, they should not be deprived of each other, only because they wanted to be true to him. No, he must eliminate himself and let them be happy. After all Uddhava was like a young brother, and both of them were devoted to Krishna.

He looked back upon his wasted life. He had had high hopes of being an Acharya, but they had been dashed when he left his Guru to win Shaibya. He had had ambitions, but they were shattered when he disobeyed Shrigalava Vaasudeva and refused to fight Krishna. He had been vain enough to think that he could play at politics and help Krishna to overcome Jarasandha with the help of Shaibya, and now he had lost her. Life was ashes in his mouth.

He was a Brahman; all that was left to him was his learning and his skill in arms. He would be able to walk

through the ruins of his life with head erect, if only he could re-capture the dignity of a Brahman. That lay in *Tapas*, in rising superior to the lure of the senses and the hopes of success. But he had lost the persistence to preserve *Tapas*, in the sordid life of Karavirapura, when he was kept oscillating between fear and the wish to flatter Shrigalava Vaasudeva. His *tejas* — light — was not *Brahma*, nor *Kshatra* — neither that of a true Brahman nor of a true Kshatriya. He just wanted position and power from Shrigalava, and smiles from Shaibya, and at the end, he was nowhere.

Now he must be himself. He must tear this weakness for Shaibya from his heart, and make her and Uddhava happy. And he must join Krishna in his fight for Dharma. His ego had to be conquered to become like Guru Sandipani; he must live only in Dharma, unafraid and unlured.

Shvetaketu decided upon his course of action; he made up his mind : what had to be done, had to be done at once. He sought out Uddhava and took him to a distant corner of the little forest in the rear of the homestead of the Shooras which sprawled out into mansions, buildings and huts on the bank of the Yamuna.

'Uddhava, dear friend, I want you to do me a favour,' said Shvetaketu with some effort to keep back the choking sensation in his throat.

'Favour ! I am always at your service. You have just to say what you want me to do,' said Uddhava in surprise, for it was unusual between such friends as they were to ask for a favour in such a formal way.

'I want you to be your old self,' said Shvetaketu. 'Just as you were when we last met in Karavirapura.'

'Why ? What is the matter with me ? ' asked Uddhava biting his lips, exasperated at the idea that, in spite of his best efforts, he could never master himself sufficiently well to elude friendly observation.

Shvetaketu shook his head. 'Between us there must be complete frankness. You are different — because — because — of Shaibya.'

'Shaibya!' exclaimed Uddhava in feigned surprise.

'I know, Uddhava, that you would like to marry her. She also, I learn, would like to marry you. But being the Arya that you are, you have chosen to renounce her rather than betray me. Shaibya also, I am sure, would prefer not to break her pledge which once she gave me,' said Shvetaketu.

'But who has told you all this? Where did you get all these notions?' asked Uddhava in an agitated voice. The wound in his heart, which he thought was healed, was now bleeding again.

'I know I am right. You have both been doing your best to control yourselves. But the God of Love has no mercy, I know. And I don't want to stand between you two. I have renounced her in your favour, brother,' said Shvetaketu, tightening his self-control to prevent a breakdown.

Uddhava heard these words in amazement. His heart throbbed violently in his ears. Was he free to win Shaibya and fulfil his heart's desire? Again, was he justified in accepting the supreme sacrifice on the part of a friend, who, he knew, loved Shaibya to distraction?

'Don't look downcast,' said Shvetaketu. 'You are thinking of my disappointment. It is true that I hoped to make her my wife. But I know you will make her a better husband. As the daughter-in-law of Devabhaga, the noble lord of the Shooras, she will continue to be a princess. And with her temperament, she would find it difficult to adjust herself to a poor Brahman.'

'What about you? Does this not dash your hopes to the ground? Is this not the sacrifice of your own life?' asked Uddhava.

'I cannot rear my happiness on the misery of two people I love so much. I am happy to give up what ought to be given up,' said Shvetaketu.

Uddhava smiled faintly. 'Shall I talk to you frankly, Shvetaketu? You are trying to give up what you want most — for me. I have already given up — for you —

what you want me to take. Your heart is bleeding, I see. Mine has bled too but the wound has healed. I will also not build my happiness on your misery. I have realised the futility of passing moods and have renounced them since Krishna spoke to me of them. I have not forgotten his words : "The man who is never perturbed is a prince among men : his strength lies in endurance without complaints",' said Uddhava.

'We have to be worthy of each other. But you, Uddhava, are a Kshatriya, Krishna's best friend. I can't cripple you by breaking your heart. I am a Brahman. What I have to do is to renounce the lures of the world — to find strength by giving them up,' said Shvetaketu.

Suddenly Trivakra emerged from behind a hedge. 'Fools, you are talking about bartering Shaibya as you like,' she spoke angrily. Both friends got up in amazement. 'Have you considered what Shaibya thinks about you? She has already chosen Krishna, and Krishna has accepted her. Woe is me,' she said in bitterness, and hastily walked away.

Uddhava and Shvetaketu looked at each other, both looking very foolish.

'Woman! You are the greatest wonder in creation,' said Shvetaketu bitterly.

'Krishna! I am amazed at that,' exclaimed Uddhava.

'Sister, I am glad you have been re-born today,' said Krishna, after he had taken a seat, Subhadra sitting on his lap.

'Lord, don't call me sister. I am your slave, the dust on your feet — oh! How can I expiate the sin of abusing you, and always thinking of killing you?' sinful Shaibya, sitting at his feet, asked him in a tragic tone.

'By not mentioning it. I have been waiting for this moment all these days. I knew it would come, and it came sooner than I expected,' said Krishna in tones of tender affection.

'Believe me when I say that you are born to conquer. You have conquered anger and malice — purged your

heart of violence. Few saints could have done that,' said Krishna.

'You did it for me,' said Shaibya.

'No, it was your better self that conquered your passions. You have to decide on your future,' said Krishna.

'I will do as you choose, Lord,' said Shaibya.

'No, no, you have to do exactly as you wish,' said Krishna.

'Show me the way. I will follow it,' said Shaibya.

'Which husband do you want me to marry?' she asked.

'Whom do you want to marry — Uddhava or Shvetaketu?' asked Krishna with a smile.

'Shvetaketu betrayed me.' She lapsed into her old bitterness and then pulled herself up. Suddenly Shaibya smiled mischievously. 'Lord, if you give me the choice, why not let me choose a third?' asked Shaibya.

'Provided I can trust him to make you happy,' said Krishna.

'Will you let me choose him if I am sure I will be happy with him? Give me your word,' said Shaibya, smiling in her old alluring way.

'So long as you do not choose me, you are free to choose whomever you like,' said Krishna mischievously.

The old spirit flared up in Shaibya. 'And why not you? I have already chosen; I am already your slave,' she said defiantly.

'Because I know that I can only make you happy as I am now — a brother,' said Krishna.

'You don't want me as a wife?' asked Shaibya.

'Shaibya, I don't know whether I can find a wife whom I can make happy. Anyway, I can't make an appropriative woman like the Princess of Karavirapura happy. I belong to too many people — but above all to Dharma. And for the moment — I don't know for how many years — I cannot take a wife,' said Krishna. Then he paused for a

moment and became serious. 'Shaibya, you have *raja-dharma* in your blood. You will understand what I say. Every moment now I am in danger. Great danger hangs over Mathura and the Yadavas. *Adharma,* with jaws wide open, wants to swallow us — me particularly. Vast combinations of powers are being planned to destroy me. Even in Mathura, intrigue is rife against me. And in spite of the love of all, I have to fight single-handed, for I will not mobilise the forces of hate.'

'Oh, I know, I know. I myself had become an instrument in the hands of your enemies,' said Shaibya.

'And I want you to be with me in the struggle as the wife either of Uddhava or Shvetaketu,' said Krishna. 'Both are good men and brave.'

'I can't marry both of them. Can I?' asked Shaibya, her eyes flashing in beauteous indignation. 'And do you only want to use me as an instrument?' asked Shaibya.

'All noble people become the instruments of Dharma,' said Krishna. 'I live for it — and for nothing else.'

'Of the two who will be the more useful to you, Lord? Don't forget that I am your slave and your words shall be my law,' said Shaibya.

'You shall wed whomever you like,' said Krishna. Then he smiled in mischief again and said, 'Except myself.'

'Is it true, as Shvetaketu says, that he is trying to frustrate Jarasandha's plans to destroy you?' asked Shaibya. 'And do you think that I can serve you better by being at Kundinapura?'

'If you help in frustrating Jarasandha's plans, I and the Yadavas of Mathura will owe you our lives. You will be their guardian goddess,' said Krishna.

The eyes of Shaibya flashed as they used to do in the triumphant days of Karavirapura.

Suddenly Mother Devaki stood in the doorway, greatly agitated, her eyes in tears. Behind her was Trivakra, her eyes also swollen with tears. They saw Krishna smiling

at Shaibya and Shaibya looking at Krishna with glowing eyes. Mother Devaki sought the support of the pillar.

'Krishna, what do I hear?' asked the Mother.

Krishna and Shaibya both got up out of respect. Shaibya also touched the Mother's feet as Subhadra clung to them with affection.

Krishna saw what had perturbed his mother. He turned to Shaibya, 'Sister Shaibya, tell Mother what you are going to do.' His voice was mocking and his eyes mischievous.

'Whom do you want to marry?' asked the Mother, confused by the use of the word 'sister' by Krishna.

'Mother, I don't want to marry just yet,' said Shaibya, restored to her old confident self. 'I am going back to Karavirapura to beg forgiveness of my aunt for having made her miserable all her life. I must purge my heart of hate, that is my concern. I am going with the caravan which is proceeding to Kundinapura with Acharya Shvetaketu. And Govinda has promised to send an escort.'

The Mother was all smiles. She turned triumphantly to Trivakra. 'You liar! I know my son better.'

'Mother, your son always misses a good bride,' said Krishna as he laughed gaily.

37

WOMEN CONSPIRE

Rukmini was in a bad mood. Things were going wrong. Preparations were proceeding apace to hold a *swayamvara* for her. Her grandfather Kaishika had confessed his inability to help her escape it. Bhishmaka was by temperament helpless ; not all her stormy interviews, nor the bitter tears she shed, could give him the courage to resist the will of her brother, Rukmi.

Rukmi had set his heart on having his sister married to Shishupala, the heir-apparent of Damaghosha, the King of Chedi, and on securing in return the hand of Apnavi, the grand-daughter of Emperor Jarasandha. All the plans had been well laid and promptly executed. Invitations had been issued to kings, and their men were already arriving to make preparations for their masters.

Rukmini had played with the idea of drowning herself in the palace well, but gave it up as she loved life and had been dreaming all the time of being the bride of the cowherd boy she had once seen. She had not yet given up all hope ; there were so many stories afloat about his miraculous power that she felt he was sure to come some day and rescue her. It was in this hope that she had kept in constant touch with Trivakra and through her with Mother Devaki, and exerted her influence with her father and grandfather to see Acharya Shvetaketu installed in an *ashram,* where he could educate the cadets of the Bhoja clan and train them in arms. As a last chance she had pressed the young Acharya to go to Mathura to beg of Krishna to come to her rescue. Shvetaketu, however, had come back without any definite assurance. The only consolation he could give was that Krishna was completely

opposed to false *swayamvaras* and hated princesses being bartered away against their wishes. However, things were becoming difficult for Krishna in Mathura itself and there were few chances of his risking a war to save her.

However, Shvetaketu had provided her with a great source of strength in Princess Shaibya of Karavirapura, who, on her way back home from Mathura, had joined the caravan with which he had travelled. She was now halting for a few days at Kundinapura at her grandfather's palace.

When Rukmini met Shaibya she could not help admiring the grace of her bearing. At first sight she felt jealous of this beautiful, dark woman who had lived in the home of Krishna, and perhaps stolen his heart. But when she told Shaibya about her difficulties, she found the Karavirapura princess quite prepared to help her.

'Princess Rukmini, you are wrong,' said Shaibya with the air of a mature woman though she was barely four years older. 'Let me tell you one thing. No one can make you do anything if you have a resolute will,' she added with a touch of pathos that heightened the effect of the earnestness with which she spoke.

'But you don't know what is happening now,' said Rukmini in excitement. 'Everything is ready. Within a month the princes will arrive. The date of the *swayamvara* is fixed, and on the appointed day I shall be offered as a sacrifice to the wicked schemes of my brother and Jarasandha.'

'But you can refuse to be offered,' said Shaibya firmly.

'If Krishna does not come to my rescue, the only escape for me is to drown myself in the river or the well,' said Rukmini.

'How did you come to love Govinda so much?' asked Shaibya.

'Oh, you don't know what happened to me when I saw him. I have been a different person since,' said Rukmini.

'Yes, he always makes you feel different,' said Shaibya with a smile which appeared to Rukmini too sad for so young a woman.

'I saw him when he killed Kamsa and Chanura. Then he stood triumphant in that tumultuous crowd like the God Indra commanding the storm. I saw him as he flung himself ardently into the arms of Mother Devaki. At that moment he became part of me. Since then I have been dreaming of him every night, the peacock feather in his diadem fluttering in the air. Oh sister, you don't know how mad I am after him. You are a wise woman ; I am not,' said Rukmini.

In reply Shaibya again smiled sadly and sighed at a compliment which she felt was far from being deserved.

'Oh, I want to marry Gopala and no one else,' said Rukmini, her fine eyes flashing with insistent desire.

'He will not marry anyone now,' said Shaibya with an attempted smile.

'Why ? What has he against me ? ' asked Rukmini.

'No, he has something against himself,' said Shaibya. 'He told me so.'

Rukmini's transparent skin flushed red with jealousy as she retorted, 'I knew he was fond of women.'

'Don't be jealous, Princess,' Shaibya said earnestly. 'I am no more than his slave.' She closed her eyes in quiet sadness.

'Then you have already won him,' said Rukmini with a touch of bitterness.

'Princess, you are quite wrong about him. You will have to go far if you want to win him,' said Shaibya.

'Why did he tell you that he would not marry anyone now ? ' asked Rukmini, anxious to probe into the secrets of Shaibya and know more about Krishna.

'He told me that *adharma* — unrighteousness — stands with its jaws open to swallow him. Besides you are a princess and he is a cowherd. He cannot take the risk of ruining a woman's life,' said Shaibya.

'I thought he was fearless. Of whom is he so afraid?' asked Rukmini. 'I wish I had been born a milkmaid!' she exclaimed in a burst of girlish frankness. 'Then I could have gone with him into the fields; I could have churned butter for him and offered it to him. They say the milkmaids of Vrindavan did that. They were so lucky. I was born a princess—a prisoner to my royal prestige, a pawn in Jarasandha's game,' she said excitedly.

'Don't get excited, Princess,' said Shaibya. 'You will require all your coolness to win him.'

'But the only man whom I look to to save me just won't help me,' said Rukmini suddenly overcome by a despondent mood.

Shaibya smiled enigmatically. 'Princess Rukmini, what have you done to deserve him?'

'Deserve him! Surely the Princess of Chedi is fit for.....'

'.... a cowherd,' Shaibya interrupted, laughing.

'Oh, excuse me,' Rukmini said in self-reproaching humility. 'I am a fool. I hate being a princess, but I cannot forget I am one. I am a fool, an idiot,' she repeated with charming disingenuity.

'Shall I tell you a secret, Princess?' asked Shaibya. 'If you want him to help you, with all your heart, and with all your life, he will. He always helps those who want him.'

'Oh, but I do want him to help me,' said Rukmini tragically.

'No, you don't. Listen, Princess. In Karavirapura I was an outcaste, a wicked, obstinate, self-conceited princess. He came to my rescue,' said Shaibya.

'How?' asked Rukmini as if feeling a fit of jealousy again.

'I was without anyone to befriend me,' continued Shaibya reminiscently. 'Govinda gave me a father in Vasudeva and a mother in Devaki. I wanted to kill him

to avenge my uncle's death, who was to me God himself. He came to my rescue unasked and purified me.'

'How I envy you, Princess Shaibya! I wish he would purify me also,' said Rukmini.

'He will not, till you want him to,' Shaibya repeated with emphasis.

'Did you want him?' asked Rukmini, trying to probe into Shaibya's heart.

'Yes, I wanted him with every heart-beat of mine, but in order to hate him, to kill him. He came because I so wanted him, and cured me of hate,' said Shaibya.

Rukmini, with charming frankness, laughed heartily. 'Oh, I thought he wanted to marry you!'

'Yes, every young woman would like him to marry her,' said Shaibya. 'Even Trivakra would do it if she were a young unmarried woman. But he won't marry unless.....'

'Unless?' asked Rukmini anxiously.

'..... he finds a wife who can share the mission for which he lives,' said Shaibya.

'Oh, I wish I knew what that was. The other day I went to our cowshed to make friends with the cows. But they all looked at me angrily, and one of them would even have broken my bones had I not run away,' said Rukmini.

'You know, cows and horses eat out of Krishna's hands, and so do men and women lay down their lives for him,' said Shaibya.

'I am jealous of you, sister. You know him so well,' Rukmini replied.

'If you really want him to marry you, you will have to put up with many slaves — Trivakra and Shaibya, Uddhava and Shvetaketu, Mother Devaki and little Subhadra,' said Shaibya with a touch of sadness. 'He is the beloved of us all. You might as well think of appropriating to yourself the sun which gives life to all. The sun gives warmth to all who hunger for the sunshine.'

'So, if I marry him, I am going to have a husband who will be sunshine to all?' asked Rukmini with mock despair.

'Yes, to each according to his wish,' Shaibya replied. 'But are you ready to share his mission?' she asked.

'Oh, I would do everything to win him,' replied Rukmini.

'Even at the cost of your life?' asked Shaibya.

'Yes, yes. But what is the mission of his existence? I do not know.'

'I will tell you. He has come to establish Dharma in this turbulent world,' said Shaibya.

'Then I am completely unworthy of him. I do not know what Dharma is!'

'But you can help him by yourself destroying *adharma,*' said Shaibya.

'I am not the venerable Parashurama. I cannot take a battle-axe and split the heads of wicked kings,' said Rukmini.

'You can fight *adharma,* Rukmini. You have a more powerful weapon. Think of it,' said Shaibya. 'Who is the deadliest enemy of Dharma?'

'My brother,' said Rukmini.

'Your brother is a straw in the wind. The enemy is Jarasandha — who disregards all Dharma. He is the tyrant who lives on the blood and sweat of his people; the conqueror who enslaves kings or destroys them; the refuge of the wicked, the lawless and the lustful; and the foe of all who live by *Tapas,*' said Shaibya.

'He is my enemy too,' said Rukmini. 'I wish I could kill him. At one time I thought of selecting him in the *swayamvara* and marrying him. Then on the first occasion I could strangle him with my bare hands.'

Shaibya smiled indulgently. 'Don't invent wild ideas, Rukmini. If you want to help Krishna in his mission, decide not to marry Shishupala whatever happens.'

'I am not going to marry that foolish prince of Chedi,' said Rukmini.

'That is rejecting a bad husband to choose a good one. It is not the way Krishna would like you to act,' said Shaibya.

'What else can I do?' asked Rukmini.

'Expose the false *swayamvara,*' said Shaibya.

'But that would not bring Krishna to me,' said Rukmini.

'It would,' said Shaibya. 'If I know him aright, I think he will come, not to win you — but to establish Dharma, to destroy the *adharma* of princesses being forced into marriage by a false *swayamvara.*'

'But then he will not marry me,' said Rukmini.

'Perhaps he will — if you are ready to give up everything to share his life,' said Shaibya.

'Oh, I wish I knew how to do it,' said Rukmini.

'Be prepared to die for Dharma and you will secure it — once he told Uddhava so in my presence,' said Shaibya.

A few days later Shaibya with her retinue left for Karavirapura.

RUKMINI ON 'THE BARTER OF COWS'

When Shaibya left her, Rukmini was lost in thought. She felt all the pride of being the princess of a royal house, and the talk that she had had with Shaibya gave it a mortal blow. She had been fascinated by Krishna. Her fondness had been fed by his miraculous achievements. She had taken it for granted that no one on earth would think of refusing her, if she could induce her father and grandfather to make the offer. She was a royal princess; Krishna was the second son of a Yadava chief; she could not, therefore, possibly imagine that if the offer came, the chief's son — contemptuously referred to as Gopala, the cowherd — would wait even for a moment to hurry to the wedding ceremony. Now she felt humiliated. She had tried to throw herself at the feet of the cowherd and had been kicked. For a moment she thought she richly deserved a kick for trying to step down from her high status.

In mortification she shed bitter tears. She did not want to marry Shishupala. Gopala would not have her either. Even if she married him, she would have to share him with cowherdesses and Shaibyas. Oh, the cruelty of it!

However, it was difficult to forget Krishna of the sky-blue skin, — as he stood triumphantly when he gave the death-blow to Kamsa or as he flung himself into the arms of his mother. She tried to form pictures of him making the crooked Trivakra straight; fighting the God of Death in Nagaloka and rescuing Guru Sandipani's son; making the crippled Garuda become a swift runner; cutting Rukmi's arrow into two with his *Chakra*; humbling the pride of the Emperor by saving his life; and curing Shaibya,

though she had been bent on killing him, of her hate and anger.

As one picture after another rose before her mind, she thought that there was something marvellous about him. It would be wonderful to be his wife; whether he was a prince or a cowherd or a fugitive made no difference.

Rukmini reviewed the situation from her knowledge of things. Now that she had discussed the matter with Shvetaketu and Shaibya, she knew that his enemies in Mathura wanted to destroy him. Jarasandha wanted to kill him too; she was only being made a pawn in the game of annihilating him. And he was alone — all alone — in the face of internal and external dangers. Her heart was imperious in its demand; she must save him.

Then the truth flashed on her. She, Rukmini, was the centre round which Jarasandha's strategy revolved. Her despair disappeared. She smiled triumphantly. 'Gopala, however wicked you are, I shall absorb all your sunshine and reflect it too,' she muttered to herself. 'And what if I die in the attempt?'

Rukmini stood up, washed her tear-soiled face, changed her clothes and went to meet her father, King Bhishmaka.

Both Bhishmaka and *yuvaraja* Rukmi were sitting on a terrace, reviewing the preparations which had been made for the *swayamvara,* when they saw a chariot rolling into the court and Rukmini alighting from it. Neither of them liked these lightning visits of Rukmini's; they invariably meant quarrels, storms, and exchange of verbal injuries between the brother and the sister, and tears.

Rukmini came, her queenly face set in stern dignity. Bhishmaka sighed. It offered the prospect of domestic thunder and lightning. Rukmi scowled; he was thoroughly disgusted with his uncontrolled sister.

'Father, is your plan to sell me complete?' asked Rukmini flouncing down on a seat in front of them.

'Why do you talk like this, Rukmini?' asked Bhishmaka almost helplessly. 'We are all doing this for your good, my child.'

'Oh, yes. Don't I know it?' said Rukmini with ill-concealed bitterness.

'A daughter's business is to enhance the family prestige. Why can't you keep to the *antahpur*, Rukmini?' said Rukmi with a frown. 'You don't understand a thing.'

'I do. The family prestige is going to be lost by my being bartered,' said Rukmini.

'How can we do anything which would lower the prestige of the royal house of the Bhojas?' asked Rukmi.

'You are having me married to your friend, Shishupala, aren't you?' Rukmini replied boldly. She looked fiercely at her brother.

'Father, Rukmini has no sense,' said Rukmi, turning to his father. 'She cannot understand what is good for her.'

'Don't I?' angrily asked Rukmini. 'Listen, you, the wisest of the wise,' she added sarcastically and began imitating her brother's way of talking. 'Rukmini alone can save the situation. Jarasandha is the great emperor. He has lost his prestige. His son-in-law has been killed by a cowherd. I, Rukmi, Vidarbha's heir-apparent, alone can take his place,' she concluded as she twirled a non-existent moustache in imitation of her brother's manner and broadened her chest out as he did when talking about himself.

'Nonsense, nonsense,' said Rukmi.

'I am talking sense,' she retorted and resumed her imitation. 'The great emperor is the laughing-stock of the world. He could not even catch a cowherd; on the contrary, the cowherd saved him from death. I, Rukmi, the great pupil of Parashurama, will restore his prestige and be his right-hand man.'

Bhishmaka, as usual, withdrew into himself, for whenever a storm broke out between the brother and the sister, he could control neither; on such occasions, he listened to both till it blew over.

'Will you stop?' shouted Rukmi.

'Will you listen?' Rukmini retorted. Then she resumed her mimicry. 'What do you understand of statecraft?' she parodied her brother's manner. 'Go to *antahpur*, you silly girl. You are only a cow to be sold for a good price. I will give you to Shishupala. That will bind Damaghosha to me. I will marry Apnavi, the granddaughter of the emperor. Then I will be the master of all and lead Jarasandha's army.'

Rukmi, furious with anger, got up to leave.

'Don't leave us so soon, brother,' Rukmini said with a sneer. 'Possibly I might teach you a little better statecraft if you listened to me.' Again she resumed the mannerism of Rukmi. 'This barter of girls, these cows, will cement the alliance between Jarasandha's friends. Avanti is already dependent upon Vidarbha; it cannot drift away from the empire. I, Rukmi, through my sister, who is a clever girl, though wrong-headed, will control Chedi.'

'Of course, you are wrong-headed,' Rukmi shouted.

The imitation of Rukmi was so perfect that, in spite of all his efforts, Bhishmaka could not help bursting into a laugh. 'Go on, Rukmini,' he said. Suddenly in an appreciative mood, he added: 'You are doing very well, Rukmini. I like your imitation of your brother. I enjoy it. Go on.'

'Father, it is you who have spoiled Rukmini,' said Rukmi.

Bhishmaka was now in a mood to enjoy this storm. 'She needs no one to spoil her, Rukmi. She was born spoilt,' he said.

'Let me please continue, Father,' said Rukmini, and then she resumed the mannerisms of her brother with lofty brows and a brave gesture. 'Now, listen, you poor, brainless sister of mine. I will then lead the forces of Jarasandha and his friends, Shishupala, Shalva, Vinda and Anuvinda, and of course the armies of Chedi.' In imitation of Rukmi's way, she slapped her chest.

'Oh, very clever!' exclaimed the King laughing till the tears ran down his cheeks.

'I, Rukmi, I am a clever man,' said Rukmini with the same mannerisms. 'I will see that Damaghosha, the old fool, does not meddle in my affairs. Then I shall march on Mathura, get hold of that cowherd and cut his throat.'

Rukmi was furious at his sister laying bare his inner mind in a way which exposed him to ridicule. 'I will, I will, if you want it that way,' he shouted, taking a step as if he was going to hit Rukmini.

Rukmini stood up in her seat, stepped forward to arrest his progress, and went on with her imitative performance. 'Nay, more, I Rukmi, shall get my father to retire. I shall become the King of Vidarbha. I will perform the *Rajasuya Yajna;* crowned heads will wash my feet. I, Rukmi, will be the *chakravartin.*'

Rukmi was foaming at the mouth.

'I won't listen to this any more.'

'Sit down and listen, Brother. You can learn many things from me,' said Rukmini as she pushed Rukmi back into his seat and resumed her parody. 'When the emperor joins his ancestors I shall annex his empire to my kingdom —and all this because I have got a cow sister whom I was wise enough to sell to Shishupala.'

Then Rukmini laughed till the tears welled up in her eyes. She turned to Bhishmaka. 'Father, am I not a cow? See, I have a brother who has the brains of a mad bull. Ha, ha, ha, Father, let me tell you that you are going to find yourself in difficulties if you play the game of Jarasandha. Please listen to me,' she begged with folded hands, her mood suddenly changing into a plaintive one.

'What can I do, Rukmini? You must maintain the reputation of the family. I have agreed to hold the *swayamvara.* The kings will soon be arriving in Kundinapura,' said Bhishmaka.

'Then leave me free to choose my husband. Don't make it a fraud,' said Rukmini.

Bhishmaka tried to pacify her. 'But, left to yourself, my child, you will never make a good choice.'

'I will make a good choice if you invite Krishna Vaasudeva. The whole world speaks of his miraculous deeds.'

'My child, my child,' appealed Bhishmaka pathetically. 'You have certainly lost your head. How can I invite him to a *swayamvara* of princes? You are a princess. You cannot wed a chief's son, brought up as a cowherd.'

'Well, he has been greater than the Emperor. He gave him his life,' said Rukmini.

'But look at his family, his status. No prince of royal blood will attend the *swayamvara* if he is invited,' said Bhishmaka.

'Suppose I don't choose anyone in the *swayamvara*?' Rukmini asked.

'They will feel insulted and declare war on us,' Bhishmaka said tragically.

'Would they declare war if I died in the *swayamvara mandapa*?' asked Rukmini.

In utter helplessness Bhishmaka folded his hands before his daughter. 'Please, please, Rukmini, don't talk of such inauspicious things when we are discussing your wedding. I wish I could help you. The *swayamvara* must be held. You can, if you like, choose any other prince rather than Shishupala, but he won't accept you. Jarasandha wants you to be wedded to Shishupala only.'

'You want it too,' Rukmini said.

'Of course, I do,' said Bhishmaka. 'I have not forgotten how Jarasandha made my father retire and seated me on the throne. If we had resisted, the Vidarbha chiefs would have been destroyed and Kundinapura reduced to ashes. You don't know, my child, what we had to pass through then; you were not even born.'

'So I am the key to open the door to imperial power. Now I know the value of the cow,' said Rukmini. Then she looked at Rukmi, put out her tongue and added: 'And I also know the scheming of my brother bull.' Then she left the Palace.

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SHVETAKETU'S PLEDGE

On the fifth of the bright half of the month of Magha, when the Festival of Spring was usually held throughout Aryavarta, the *swayamvara* of Rukmini was going to be held.

By the end of the month of Paush, several kings and princes had arrived in Kundinapura, the capital of Vidarbha. They came with their retinues, bringing chariots, elephants and horses with them to indicate their importance. The town was ready for the celebrations.

King Bhishmaka of the royal house of Bhoja had made lavish preparations for the event. Arrangements had been completed for feasting the guests as well as the villagers who were pouring in to participate in the festival. For the assembly of kings, a *mandapa* had been specially erected, adorned with flags and bunting and domes glittering in gold. Drums and fifes played auspicious notes at stated hours of the day in every part of the city.

The guests had special camps constructed for them. The Emperor Jarasandha was the first to come, attended by several princes, and he was the personal guest of King Bhishmaka himself.

King Damaghosha of Chedi also arrived with his son, Prince Shishupala, who looked forward to winning Rukmini, the Princess of Vidarbha, famed for her beauty throughout the land. As guests of honour, they were given the central camp, suited to the party of the bridegroom.

King Shalva, the lord of Saubha, also came, with a few strange-looking warriors; as a staunch ally of Jarasandha, he had a cordial reception.

Dantavakra of Karusha, Princes Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti, and several other princes, satellites of Jarasandha, were also housed in appropriate camps. Each of the guests had come with only a small retinue of warriors. All of them knew that the affair was a pre-arranged one and there was no possibility of any conflict taking place, as was common in a *swayamvara.*

Though King Bhishmaka was the host, it was his son Rukmi who played the part of receiving the guests. With great difficulty, he had brought about this *swayamvara,* which was going to lay the foundation of an imperial career for him. The only drawback was his obstinate sister ; she was an unreasonable young woman.

Rukmi felt that his sister was a complete nuisance. She had unnecessarily lashed herself into a self-righteous mood. From the beginning of time, princesses were only instruments for cementing royal alliances. Few of them, seeing the way they were brought up, had the desire or the capacity to make a choice of their own, and if they had either, they were just helpless ; they could never override parental wishes. Rukmini, however, was a problem, for she had, from her childhood days, had a will of her own.

For some time it had looked as if she would resist the choice of Shishupala, the Crown Prince, for a husband. First she locked herself up in a room in the Palace, and for a few days went on hunger strike. Later she had gone about the town in defiance of all propriety and tried to interfere with the arrangements. She had never missed an occasion of making fun of him or insulting him. However, for a few days now her resistance had begun to weaken. So far she had not been reconciled to the choice, but that, as Rukmi assured himself, happened in the case of all headstrong young women, and Rukmini was headstrong if ever anyone was.

At one time Rukmi was inclined to the view that the Mathura Yadavas might create some trouble, but there were no such possibilities now and the *swayamvara* was expected to pass off without any hitch. Spies had brought the news

that some months ago, King Ugrasena of Mathura had decided to install one of Vasudeva's nephews as the Crown Prince and had ordered him to attend the *swayamvara* uninvited. But now Brihadbala, the *yuvaraja*-designate, it was reported, had declined to accept the office and the proposed installation had therefore been left in abeyance. The pleasure-loving Yadavas, on the very day of the *swayamvara,* were going to celebrate the Spring Festival by a chariot-race in Mathura itself, and his arch-enemy Krishna was busily engaged in organising the event.

It was on the first day of Magha that vague rumours reached Kundinapura that some king was coming to attend the *swayamvara* with a large force. The assembled guests discounted the rumour. Most of the invited guests had either come in person or sent presents and offered excuses for remaining absent. The two powerful kings in Aryavarta, Dhritarashtra of Hastinapura and Drupada of Panchala, had regretted their inability to attend but had sent presents to the bride. There was, therefore, no possibility of anyone having the courage to attend the *swayamvara* uninvited and face the combined power of the Emperor and the kings of Vidarbha and Chedi, by presenting himself in Kundinapura unannounced.

On the day itself Acharya Shvetaketu as usual got up before dawn broke, took his bathe in the river, performed his regular *sandhya,* and offered worship to the rising sun. Then he went to his *ashram* on the outskirts of the town.

Both grandfather Kaishika and King Bhishmaka had been generous towards the Acharya, who had come to be highly respected by the chiefs of the ruling clan of the Bhojas and the learned Brahmans of Kundinapura. Even the common people held him in high regard, and his students, whom he was training either in the Vedic lore or in arms, held him in profound respect. Young though he was, his devotion to learning and his skill in arms were as thorough as his charm and personality and high idealism were attractive.

When he entered the *Vedashala,* the students prostrated themselves before him. He took his usual seat, performed *homa* and *vaishvadeva* and, in company with his pupils, chanted a few Vedic *mantras* invoking the God of Fire. Then he held up his hand and began to address his pupils.

'My sons, I have to tell you something. A little over a year ago I came into your midst. The kings were generous with their hospitality. You, my sons, have given me affection, respect and service. Some of you have mastered the *Vedas;* others have acquired whatever skill in arms I possessed. But the time for parting has come.'

The boys looked up in amazement. Then Acharya Shvetaketu continued in a feeling voice: 'I have called the keeper of the fort. As soon as he comes, I will hand over the *ashram,* the cows and all the possessions it has, to him, to be presented to noble King Bhishmaka. Then I will go to him and with my blessing bid him good-bye. The time has come when I must leave this place. Don't be sorry that you have to part with me. Wherever you go, you have to remember that the blessing of Shvetaketu is with you. Wherever you are, in whatever you do, be worthy of the heritage of the mighty Parashurama and Guru Sandipani, which I have passed on to you.

'My *brahmacharins,* it is by your *Tapas* that you will lift the earth and its people to the gods. Stand true to *Tapas.* If you give it up the world will lapse into lust and violence and be demoniac.

'And, my valiant pupils, I have one guiding rule to give you. May you ever walk the path of righteousness. The arms which I have taught you to wield are to be used only to protect Dharma and to destroy *adharma.* Never use them for a selfish purpose. Never be sharers in sin.'

Shvetaketu tightened the antelope skin round his waist, took up his staff and gourd, and stood up. The pupils got up and surrounded him.

'Gurudeva, you can't go and leave us behind,' said some of the young men.

'I can't take any of you with me without the consent of your fathers. And you are the sons of Bhoja chiefs. You can't bear the hard life which I am going to face.'

'No, no, we will share your hard life,' one young man said.

'You are different, Aplava. You have no parents of whom to ask permission. You can come with me, and Jahnu also if he wants to, for being without parents I can give him permission too. But it may be days before we have a bed to sleep on or a proper meal to eat.'

'But why go, venerable Sir? And so suddenly too?' asked a young chief.

'Till last night I was waiting for the God of all gods to perform a miracle. But he has spurned my prayers. No such miracle has happened. I must, therefore, observe the *vrata* to which I am pledged. I can't stay here. Please don't ask me more,' Shvetaketu said with kindness. He blessed his pupils, and, followed by Aplava and Jahnu, left his *ashram*.

In the royal palace King Bhishmaka sat with the Emperor Jarasandha and King Damaghosha, discussing the plans for the *swayamvara,* when Acharya Shvetaketu was announced by the chamberlain. As he stepped into the room, the king and Damaghosha stood up : that was the courtesy shown by the Aryan kings to learned Acharyas. Jarasandha, however, remained seated. He prized learned men only if they were sycophants or bards ; anyway he never missed an opportunity of reminding the kings of Aryavarta that the excessive regard shown to Acharyas and *tapasvins* was bad form.

Shvetaketu acknowledged the salutation, and sat down in front of the kings, on a seat placed by the chamberlain.

'To what do we owe the honour of your visit, Best of Acharyas?' asked Bhishmaka, after Shvetaketu had given his blessing to them.

'Noble lord of the Bhojas (Bhishmaka), I have come to bid good-bye and give you my parting blessing.'

Bhishmaka was taken by surprise. 'Good-bye! Where are you going? Why? And at this time so suddenly? Has anyone offended you, Acharya?'

Shvetaketu sat silent for a while. 'Noble King, I am leaving Kundinapura. I have given my parting blessing to my pupils. I have handed over the *ashram* with all the property which you had given me to the keeper of the fort. I have come to give you my blessing, and go.....'

'Where to?'

'Wherever the gods lead me, but away from here,' Shvetaketu said.

'But why go at all? Why this sudden resolve?' asked Bhishmaka, not yet recovered from his surprise. 'Has anything been lacking here?'

'Noble King, you have been very kind to me. But I cannot reconcile myself to accepting your hospitality any more,' Shvetaketu replied.

'Please, please, Gurudeva, if you want to go at all, go after the *swayamvara* is over. It would be inauspicious if you left during the celebrations,' said Bhishmaka.

'Go, if you must, after the *swayamvara* is over,' interrupted Jarasandha, suppressing his irritation. He knew Shvetaketu from the days of his flight from Gomantaka, as the pupil of Guru Sandipani, the master of the martial art and the tutor of the Avanti princes. He had also heard from them that the Acharya was highly respected in Kundinapura and was training Bhoja cadets. He, therefore, did not like his abrupt departure which might be considered as a bad omen by some of the princes. To many, to let a learned Acharya leave your house, he knew, was inviting a disaster.

'I would prefer to go now. I would break my *vrata*, my sacred vow, if I stayed here.'

Damaghosha felt interested. He had heard of Shvetaketu from Krishna and Balarama, and had also heard Guru Sandipani praising him as one of his finest pupils. He sat up. 'Why now, Best of Acharyas?' he asked. 'Sure-

ly nothing could have happened so suddenly as to lead you to this resolve.'

'It has, noble King of Chedi,' Shvetaketu said solemnly, 'as I realised after the noble princes of Avanti came to meet me last night. For some years, as you know, I was lost to the duties of an Acharya. I spoke about it to you, noble lord of Bhojas, when you invited me to stay here over a year ago. When I miraculously escaped from Karavirapura and resumed my vows of asceticism, I pledged myself never to stay where Dharma, the law of the gods and the Fathers, was violated.'

Bhishmaka was confused. Jarasandha sensed mischief. 'Why can't you conform to Dharma here? What has gone wrong? Everything has been all right so far and you have enjoyed the hospitality of King Bhishmaka,' the Emperor remarked with a frown.

Shvetaketu looked at the Emperor with stern dignity. 'The noble Bhishmaka has truly discharged his duty enjoined by the *Vedas* and offered lavish hospitality to learning.'

'What then?' asked the Emperor impatiently.

Shvetaketu continued unperturbed. 'He was kind enough to give me food and shelter. I also did my best to discharge my duty. I humbly tried to do what was my Dharma. I helped Asmakacharya, the royal preceptor, as well as I could. I have taught the *Vedas* to those worthy of being taught. I trained young Bhoja chiefs in arms. There is nothing more I can do now. I came with nothing; I am not taking anything with me, great Chakravarti.'

The dignified way in which Shvetaketu rebuked the implications of the tone which Jarasandha had assumed, made the two kings feel small.

Bhishmaka interrupted apologetically. 'Best of Acharyas, you have conferred favours upon us. Even during the short time you have been here, you have made Kundinapura famous for its learning. Your training has

given a new spirit and vigour to our young Bhojas. The people of Vidarbha have come to respect you for learning and *Tapas.* That is why I don't want you to go. Please stay with us.'

Jarasandha smiled contemptuously at the abject way in which Bhishmaka was pressing Shvetaketu not to depart.

'I must adhere to my vow,' said Shvetaketu.

'But how does your vow prevent you from staying with us — after all these days?' asked Bhishmaka with a nervous laugh. 'If there is anything wrong, we can rectify it.'

'Noble lord of the Bhojas, I know you can't, even if you want to,' said Shvetaketu, and with a defiant look at Jarasandha added. 'You cannot, for instance, give up the *swayamvara.*'

'What has that to do with your vow?' asked Jarasandha, haughtily trying to overawe Shvetaketu into silence.

'Noble Chakravarti, can you bear to hear a truth spoken in your presence?' asked Shvetaketu.

'Why? What is wrong with me?' retorted Jarasandha with a frown.

'I know that you only like people to speak what you want to hear. You may not want to hear what I am thinking or saying,' said Shvetaketu firmly.

'Am I so bad?' Jarasandha asked with a contemptuous laugh.

'The world says so. I came here only to give my parting blessing to the noble lord of the Bhojas and depart in peace. But if you require me to speak, I don't want it to be said that I did not tell the truth for fear of the great Chakravarti. Listen: I am leaving this place because the *swayamvara,* which is going to be held at your instance, is *adharma,*' said Shvetaketu.

'*Adharma?*' said Jarasandha angrily. 'What is wrong with the *swayamvara?*' He could not help feeling

that had anyone in Magadha, however learned, talked to him in this manner, he would have had him beheaded straightaway ; but he knew he was in the land of Bhishmaka and Damaghosha, and had to respect their customs and superstitions.

'Everything, noble Chakravarti,' replied Shvetaketu. 'So far I had only heard the people of Kundinapura indulging in gossip ; yesterday Prince Anuvinda confirmed it. The bridegroom is already chosen by you. The royal guests have agreed, under your orders, to let him have the Princess. For fear of you, none of the other Princes has the courage to compete with Shishupala in the feats of arms ; none of them will have the courage to accept the bride, if he is chosen by her. Princess Rukmini, whom I have been taught to regard as my younger sister, is going to be traded for Princess Apnavi, your grand-daughter. I had expected that Mahadeva, the Great God, in his gracious mercy, would work some miracle and stop the *swayamvara.* But he has denied his favour to us. The deal is going to be put through; Princess Rukmini is going to be sacrificed to the lust of power. I can't stop it; I can't bless it; I must, therefore, leave.'

Shvetaketu stood up and looked at the King. 'Noble King, forgive me if you have had to hear an unpleasant truth. Chakravarti forced me to speak. I am leaving you now, noble lord of the Bhojas. It has distressed me to see even the venerable Lord of Chedi participating in this *adharma.* Kings, I give you my blessing. May the God of all gods show you the path of Dharma.' With these words, Shvetaketu stood up from his seat, extended his hand in blessing and left the hall.

The Acharya came down the steps of the Palace where his pupils and quite a large crowd of townsmen, who had heard of his sudden decision, were awaiting him. The pupils fell at the preceptor's feet; the assembled people begged for his blessing. The Acharya with staff and gourd in his hand, followed by Aplava and Jahnu who carried the

master's bow and arrows, walked towards the city gate. He blessed the crowd, which had not left him, once again, and went in the direction of the forest.

Kundinapura heard with awe that the beloved Acharya had prayed for a miracle to prevent a great crime, but the gods had not worked it. The saintly Shvetaketu, therefore, had walked away from Kundinapura before *adharma* was practised. And they associated the *adharma* with the *swayamvara,* which every one knew was going to be a fraud against the ancient laws of the Aryan Fathers.

40

ARRIVAL IN KUNDINAPURA

Krishna was not taken by surprise when the next day King Ugrasena informed him that Brihadbala had wisely declined to be installed *yuvaraja* of Mathura. The Yadava chiefs met Ugrasena and some of them pressed Krishna to vindicate the honour of the Yadavas. He alone, they said, could accomplish the impossible and humble the pride of Jarasandha and Bhishmaka.

Krishna was modest but firm. 'Venerable Elders, our honour can be vindicated only when we are prepared to die for it. We have arms and horses and chariots; we have no resolute will even to stage a chariot-race. Many of my friends think it is too trivial a matter to be bothered about. But if we can't have a chariot-race, with the horses thundering along, how can we fight the Bhojas, Chedis and Magadhas, and vindicate our honour? What is respected, is strength, not the wish to fight.'

'We are ready to fight. Lead us,' said Satyaki.

'First things first. Join me in making the race a success, and the kings of Aryavarta will sit up and begin to respect the Yadavas,' said Krishna.

'But we will have to suffer humiliation,' said Satyaki.

'There is no humiliation in acquiring strength, but there is in frittering it away,' said Krishna.

'I wish you could have broken up the *swayamvara* and brought back Princess Rukmini as a bride,' said the old chief Gada.

'I have already told you that false *swayamvaras* are sinful; so is kidnapping unwilling princesses. But don't forget that princesses have to marry princes,' he said with an apologetic smile. 'And venerable Gada, if you have

confidence in me, let me organise a chariot-race. It will open the eyes of our enemies. I want every young Yadava to help me in it. I want the honour which comes of doing well the thing which I have in hand, not the honour of doing things which can wait,' said Krishna.

'Govinda, we have complete faith in you,' said Akrura.

'Do as you think best,' said King Ugrasena and turned to Satyaki. 'You are full of valour, Satyaki. You are impatient to show it. Have confidence; Krishna alone can lead us to conquest.'

'He will, I have no doubt,' confirmed Akrura.

'Well, we feel baffled for the moment. We don't understand the way Krishna looks at things. But we are willing to do as he wishes — and make the chariot-race a success.'

After the gathering of the chiefs was over, Satyaki and his friend Virata met Krishna.

'Vaasudeva, we have broken with Brihadbala and have thrown in our lot with you,' said the impetuous Satyaki.

'That was unfair to brother Brihadbala,' said Krishna.

'He is craven-hearted. It was not in him to lead us to victory,' said Satyaki.

'He was wise. He could not lead us to victory when we are so disorganised. We want victory but we are not ready to pay the price for it,' said Krishna.

'We are,' said Virata. 'What price do you want us to pay?'

'I want you to help me by getting all the Yadava young men to join the chariot-race. Pay the price and victory is yours,' replied Krishna.

'How can victory come out of a sport?' asked Virata.

'You call a chariot-race — hundreds of Yadavas driving chariots at the cost of their lives — a sport. If it is, it is the sport of *atirathis,* the winners of battles.'

'What have you in view?' asked Satyaki. 'Have you a plan for waging war on Jarasandha?'

'We have not the means to wage war against a petty king like that of Karusha, let alone an Emperor like Jarasandha. But if we hold this chariot-race in the way I want it, I am sure great kings will look upon Mathura as a powerful ally worth counting on.'

'What do you need us to do?'

'If you want my advice, don't forsake Brihad. Bring him with you and join in the race. Have you any idea what it means to have four hundred *maharathis* in Mathura?' said Krishna.

Satyaki thought for a while. 'Vaasudeva, you are right. Kundinapura must wait till we are stronger. But I will do as you wish only on one condition: If you ever plan an attack on our enemy, let me be the first to lead it.'

Krishna smiled and placed an affectionate hand on Satyaki's shoulder. 'That is agreed. I know you will be foremost in battle.'

The next day King Ugrasena announced that the chariot-race would be held on the banks of the Yamuna at sunrise on Magha Shukla, the fifth day of the Festival of Spring. Immediately a thousand young Yadavas underwent intensive training organised by Guru Sandipani.

Soon Balarama arrived from Vrindavan, his heart bursting with joy at having brought back the rebellious Yamuna to the village of Vrindavan with his plough. He was not fond of horses nor of chariots, but joined in creating the necessary enthusiasm among the youth, punishing every idler with a generous laugh and a light tap on the head.

A fortnight before the day of the race, a hundred young Yadavas, led by Satyaki, left Mathura in the middle of the night. The city was astir with rumours of a violent quarrel between Balarama and Satyaki, but Krishna went on with the preparations for the race unperturbed.

On the eighth night before the Festival, as if by magic, four hundred chariots, with two young Yadavas armed to the teeth in each, disappeared from Mathura. So did

Krishna. The Yadavas of Mathura felt proud beyond words. Their brave young men had gone to vindicate their honour, and it was all the work of Govinda.

Fleet-footed steeds carried the brigade of chariots on their way to Kundinapura. Uddhava and Satyaki had made all the arrangements for the journey and, before anyone could bring even a vague rumour of his arrival, Krishna was heading towards the gates of Kundinapura.

When the news reached the assembled kings at Kundinapura that an uninvited king was coming to the *swayamvara* with a large force, there was consternation among them.

Warriors from each camp ran to the city gates or climbed the fort to see who was coming and with what intentions. They saw heavy clouds of dust coming towards the town, rising like smoke, accompanied by a rumbling, as of distant thunder. They heard the screeches as of angry eagles. Then rose, above all the din and dust, the notes of a powerfully-blown conch. Damaghosha, Vinda and Anuvinda immediately recognised the notes : they were those of *Panchajanya.* Krishna had come !

Riding in a chariot, Satyaki came on in advance, reined in the horses of his chariot at the city gates and blew his conch. The keeper came out and received the message.

'The best of Yadavas, Krishna Vaasudeva, has come in peace and friendship to pay his respects to the venerable Kaishika and to offer him gifts for his gracious hospitality when he was on his way to Gomantaka. Our men are going to camp half a *yojana* from the fort. The noble Vaasudeva wants to come in just by himself, accompanied by Uddhava, the noble son of Devabhaga, and Acharya Shvetaketu; King Shakradeva of Karavirapura and his minister, Punardatta, the son of the venerable Guru Sandipani; the noble kings of Agravana and Dyuna, and the noble Vainateya, the king of Garudas, lords of the forests and of the air.

'Chitraketu, the son of Devabhaga, the Best of Shooras, also brings for King Bhishmaka presents from the Best of

Yadavas, King Ugrasena. Mother Devaki has also sent her attendant, Trivakra, to give presents to Princess Rukmini, the crown jewel of the Bhojas.

'Please inform King Bhishmaka that I am awaiting permission to convey his commands to the noble Vaasudeva.'

The keeper of the fort took the message, went back through the trap door, closed it, and immediately proceeded to the Palace.

King Bhishmaka, by temperament a timid man, was in despair when he heard the message. He did not know what to do. In utter helplessness, he invited the Emperor and his other guests to a conference and straightaway drove in a chariot to his father Kaishika's place. Grandfather Kaishika was firm. Krishna was a great hero; he was the unquestioned leader of the Yadavas; he was famed for wisdom; miraculous deeds were to his credit. He had come to pay him his respects and brought presents. The laws of Aryan hospitality were clear. Krishna was to be received with all honours and, even if he had to go alone to receive him, he would do so and give him a warm welcome.

When Rukmini heard of Krishna's coming, she went wild with joy. She laughed and cried by turns; she shouted in anger and indulged in outbursts of hilarity. She was uncontrollable, and ordered the women of the Palace about, telling them to hurry up with the preparations for the *swayamvara.*

She also went over to Grandfather Kaishika before he started for the city gates. He was unhappy at Rukmini's wildly joyous mood.

'Child, child, restrain yourself, otherwise you will be miserable afterwards. You cannot marry Gopala, however worthy he is. He is not a Prince, and you are a Princess.' The comment evoked gay laughter from his grand-daughter.

Soon the news spread in the town : Krishna Vaasudeva, who had driven back Jarasandha and killed Shrigalava of Karavirapura, had come to pay his respects to Grandfather Kaishika, and Acharya Shvetaketu had also returned with

him ! The pupils of the Acharya defied parental injunctions and rushed to the city gates to welcome Krishna, for they had heard of the miraculous exploits of the Yadava hero, time and again, from their teacher's lips. And people, anxious to have the hero's *darshan,* when they heard that Grandfather Kaishika was going to receive him, joined him.

King Bhishmaka and his royal guests met in the Palace, baffled at this unexpected turn of events. Rukmi, very very furious, was all for going with his warriors and fighting the intruding cowherd. His father, Bhishmaka, now in a nervous collapse, said he would like to receive Krishna as his honoured guest. The pupils of Shvetaketu, among whom were the sons of many Bhoja chiefs, he said, had rushed wildly to meet the hero and the people were anxious to honour him. No one knew how many chariots Krishna had brought with him and the Bhojas, he pleaded, simply could not fight him.

41

HOW RUKMINI WOOED KRISHNA

People's attention shifted from the royal palace of Bhishmaka to the old palace on the outskirts of Kundinapura where Grandfather Kaishika had been living in retirement for many years, devoting his time to religious practices. Overnight arrangements were made in the vast courtyard of the old palace, and also in the adjoining *ashram* of Acharya Shvetaketu, to house the Yadava chiefs.

At the city gate Krishna and the Yadava chiefs were received by Grandfather Kaishika, King Damaghosha, Vinda and Anuvinda, and by a large crowd, which shouted "Jai Vaasudeva."

King Bhishmaka was represented by his old minister, who was accompanied by venerable Brahmans. They welcomed Krishna with auspicious *mantras.*

'Lord, the noble Lord of Vidarbha has been taken ill. As soon as he is well, he will take an early opportunity to offer you welcome,' said the minister.

'Tell him, venerable Acharya, that I shall consider myself blessed if I can have his *darshan.* But there is no hurry. I will be here for the Festival of Spring,' said Krishna with a smile which indicated his firm resolve not to depart before the day of the *swayamvara.*

The palace grounds resounded with the gay laughter of the Garudas, whose eagle faces and quaint habits attracted huge admiring crowds.

From a balcony of the palace, Rukmini saw Krishna alighting from his chariot and flung her arms around Princess Suvrata, the wife of Rukmi. Hugging her, she said : 'Suvrata, how wonderful he is !'

'Yes, I know,' said Suvrata. 'He is a sorcerer. He has bewitched you.'

Grandfather Kaishika met Krishna the next day. 'Noble Vaasudeva, the last time you honoured my house as a guest, you wanted to remain unknown. At the time I could not offer you proper hospitality. This time, however, I am going to make amends,' he said, when they found themselves alone after performing the morning rituals and meeting the crowds of visitors.

'Grandfather, please don't stand on ceremony. Don't give me royal honours, please. It will offend the kings who are the guests of the noble King Bhishmaka,' Krishna said modestly. 'Venerable Sir, I can never forget that once you gave me asylum when I was fleeing from Jarasandha. I owe you my life and hope to pay back my debt by being dutiful as if I were your son,' he added as he presented the rich gifts which King Ugrasena had sent.

'Vaasudeva, I was so sorry when Bhishmaka decided not to invite you to this *swayamvara.* I blamed him for it. However, there was an insuperable difficulty; even the Acharyas found it hard to find a way,' Kaishika hesitated to say more.

Krishna smiled in an understanding manner. 'Venerable Bhoja, I know the difficulties well. I am not a *yuvaraja.* I am not even the eldest son of a chief. I was a cowherd once and I am not sorry that I tended cows,' he said with a reassuring smile, and added : 'I have no place among kings — I know it better than Jarasandha or Rukmi.'

'Oh, Vaasudeva, please don't say that,' said the venerable Kaishika. 'You are far greater than a king. You are wiser than the wisest of us, though young. But you know that if you had been invited, you could not have competed for the hand of Rukmini, and the assembled kings would not have taken part unless they were given seats higher than yours. That would have been most unfitting.'

'Venerable King, I understand that. For a king like you, it was not even quite right to receive me at the gates. I remonstrated with my uncle Damaghosha and my friends

Vinda and Anuvinda for coming to receive me,' said Krishna with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

'Vaasudeva, you live for Dharma, so I have heard, and, if ever there was a man worthy of worship, it is you. They are not far wrong who say that you are a god. Look at the way you have come. You have won without a single blow,' said Kaishika.

'Please don't praise me too much,' replied Krishna. 'You are wise and experienced; your praises might inflate my vanity,' he added modestly.

'But I want you to join the *swayamvara* as a crowned king, to be the equal of the kings assembled here. When I abdicated my throne, I retained for myself a small principality of which I am still the king. I want to give it to you and crown you its king. That will make you the equal of the kings in the *swayamvara,*' said Kaishika.

Krishna smiled appreciatively at this noble gesture of the old king's, but shook his head. 'Venerable Bhoja, you are most gacious to me. But I was not born a king and I have no love for being one. I must be free to uphold Dharma in its entirety by all means, not only by *rajadharma.* I don't want to be enmeshed in mere kingly duties.'

'But how can there be a *swayamvara* without your taking part in it?' asked Kaishika.

'Grandfather, what King Bhishmaka is holding is not a *swayamvara.* It is a fraud, and I have come to stop it,' said Krishna in a firm tone.

'Vaasudeva, such things are not uncommon amongst us,' said Kaishika.

'It only shows that the kings have fallen from the noble ways of our Fathers. I want to rescue them,' said Krishna.

Kaishika looked at the flashing eyes and was lost in admiration. 'If you have decided not to take part in the *swayamvara,* I cannot compel you, noble Vaasudeva,' he said. 'But I want to celebrate your arrival at my house by a ceremonial *abhishek,* as one greater than kings, for so I consider you both in valour and wisdom,' he added.

'I will never reject your generous hospitality. Only you will draw upon you the wrath of Jarasandha,' said Krishna.

'I don't mind,' said Kaishika. 'To play the king is now the business of my son. Mine is to stand for the laws of Aryan hospitality and offer worship to whom worship is due.'

Next day King Bhishmaka, in spite of his nervous prostration, received Krishna in bed. His prime minister and his principal Bhoja chiefs were in attendance; Rukmi, however, was conspicuous by his absence.

Krishna came accompanied by Uddhava and Satyaki, King Shakradeva and Punardatta and the kings of Agravana and Dyuna, and Garuda in his eagle mask with his feathers and all.

Bhishmaka meekly offered an apology for not inviting Krishna to the *swayamvara.*

'Noble King, it is very good of you to offer an apology,' said Krishna, and then added with sternness, 'particularly when I am here and there is no possibility of the Yadavas of Mathura being ignored. But guided by your son, you did not invite even King Ugrasena to the *swayamvara.*'

'I left Rukmi to do everything appropriate,' Bhishmaka said helplessly. 'You know, Vaasudeva, I am none too strong and therefore leave most things to my son.'

'Let us talk to each other frankly, Best of Bhojas,' said Krishna with a candour which made Bhishmaka wince. 'You agreed to overlook the Yadavas at the instance of their enemies. If King Ugrasena had attended, the false *swayamvara* could not have been carried through,' he added.

'False *swayamvara*!' weakly murmured Bhishmaka, leaning back his head on the pillow and closing his eyes. 'Vaasudeva, you have been misinformed.'

For a moment Krishna looked compassionately at the weak king. When Bhishmaka opened his eyes, he continued: 'Best of Bhojas, I have not come to force myself on

your *swayamvara.* I do not aspire to wed into a royal family. I am a cowherd, bred, if not born, and cannot take my seat with Princes in a royal *swayamvara,* I know.'

Bhishmaka opened his eyes wide and listened to Krishna attentively. 'But I have a duty to perform towards the *Arya Dharma.* In the *swayamvara* you are going to hold, you have decided to leave no alternative to the Princess, the choice of the bridegroom is already made by Emperor Jarasandha and the other guests have agreed to accept it. The object is to forge a military alliance against the Yadavas of Mathura.' Krishna paused and then in a feeling way continued : 'You are the protector of Dharma, so I have come to ask you : Is it Dharma to use the crown jewel of Bhoja maidens, your daughter, as a pawn in the Emperor's game of destroying the Yadavas of Mathura ? Tell me the truth. What have we done to deserve such an act of unfriendliness ? ' Krishna asked.

'I assure you, noble Vaasudeva, that I have no desire to be your enemy,' said Bhishmaka. 'Much less would I be a party to destroying the Yadavas,' Bhishmaka feebly tried to answer the charge. 'How could King Damaghosha of Chedi, married to the sister of your noble father, form such a conspiracy ? And take my word for it : Such *swayamvaras* are not *adharma* ; Princesses are always married to strengthen family alliances.'

'Best of Bhojas, you are very much wiser than myself and know the laws of the Fathers of our race better than I do.' Krishna was now smiling in his most persuasive way. 'In a *swayamvara,* the bride must freely choose the bridegroom from among those invited by the father, as the ancient sages have prescribed.'

'I know,' murmured King Bhishmaka.

'Therefore, I have come here to convey to you the request of the Best of Yadavas, King Ugrasana, and the Best of Shooras, my noble father, Vasudeva, not to be a party to this *adharma,*' said Krishna folding his hands before Bhishmaka.

Bhishmaka was silent for a while. Then he said: 'It is difficult to postpone the *swayamvara*, having invited so many noble princes here for the purpose. It would be a blot on the fair name of the Bhojas.'

'Would you rather leave it to the Yadavas of Mathura to uphold the ancient law and stop the *adharma*?' asked Krishna, and his tone carried a threat.

'It would be a disaster! May the God of all gods save us from it,' said Bhishmaka helplessly and sank back on his pillow.

When Krishna returned to Kaishika's palace, Trivakra was waiting for him. She touched his feet and sat in front of him with folded hands.

'Govinda, I have brought a message from Princess Rukmini,' said Trivakra.

'I was sure you would do some such thing,' Krishna said with a smile. 'Come, tell it to me.'

Trivakra looked around to see that no one was listening, and in a low tone said: 'The Princess has sent you a message: "Govinda, you are my lord and master, in this life and the life after life. I will not wed anyone else".'

Krishna laughed. 'Trivakra, I know all that and I also know that all these years you have been working up to this. You insisted on coming here with presents, also with a sinister motive. With age, your capacity for running palace intrigues has been on the increase.'

'Govinda, don't try to make fun of me, please. You know that I live for you, and whatever I do is for you,' said Trivakra humbly.

'How could I help knowing it? Have you any more messages to give?' asked Krishna.

'The noble Bhoja Princess has sworn to die rather than wed anyone but you,' said Trivakra.

'She would not be the first young maiden who has said that and lived to marry another,' said Krishna with a laugh.

'No, she is in dead earnest. You don't know with what determination the Princess has been resisting her father and brother. She wants you to take her away with you,' said Trivakra.

Krishna became serious. 'Trivakra, that is impossible.'

'Why? Kings have carried away princesses and married them in the *gandharva* manner. That is the law. And parents have blessed such unions later,' said Trivakra.

'Please tell the Princess this: "I know you have been fond of me from the time you saw me in Mathura after the death of my Uncle Kamsa. And I am sure that even Mother would be glad if I married you",' said Krishna.

'Then where is the difficulty?' asked Trivakra.

'However, give her this message from me: "I am here to vindicate Dharma, to fight for it if necessary. And I will not convert a mission into the selfish purpose of securing a bride for myself",' said Krishna.

'Govinda, I never could understand you,' said Trivakra.

'It is my misfortune that even you, Trivakra, do not understand me. I will do nothing for my own sake—I am here only to see Dharma respected,' said Krishna.

'Then they will hold the *swayamvara*,' said Trivakra.

'So far as I can see, this *swayamvara* will not be held.'

'So you can marry Princess Rukmini. Why should anything prevent two persons marrying when they are drawn towards each other?' asked Trivakra.

'Today Dharma forbids it,' said Krishna firmly. 'Now I cannot marry the Princess of Vidarbha or anyone else; Jarasandha is bent on my destruction at any cost. I will marry only when I can give my wife a home, where she can live in comfort and peace. But tell the Princess that till then I will not choose another bride; in the meantime, she is free to choose anyone she likes. If the stars are propitious, it may be my good fortune to make her my partner in the pursuit of Dharma,' said Krishna.

Jarasandha and his allies came to a final decision to postpone the *swayamvara* and not to invite a conflict. Any false *swayamvara* for an unwilling princess, with a thousand Yadava warriors present in Kundinapura, was out of the question. They even expressed their willingness to attend a proper reception to Krishna, if their dignity was not compromised.

With his uncanny shrewdness, Jarasandha had sized up the situation and abruptly changed his strategy.

The situation was critical. Bhishmaka was very weak both in body and mind. Damaghosha, though anxious, as always, to secure his support, was averse to striking at his Queen's people, the Yadavas, and particularly to being a party to destroying her nephew, Krishna, their darling. The impressionable Princes of Avanti were his enthusiastic admirers. The Bhoja chiefs and the elders of Kundinapura were vying with each other in their adulation of the Yadava cowherd.

For a moment Jarasandha was in wild rage. The cowherd had again frustrated his plans. But he did not fail to see clearly that Krishna had made an extraordinary moral impact on all those who had assembled in Kundinapura. He came with armed Yadavas but not to fight. He came to stop the *swayamvara*, which he thought was a fraud, but had no intention of wedding the Princess himself. He came with presents to old Kaishika, universally respected among the princes, and had won the hearts of all.

This had created an unprecedented effect. Kundinapura had been carried away with enthusiasm for him and given him an effusive reception. An armed encounter was, therefore, out of the question, and an outburst of temper on his part, thought the Emperor, would only make matters worse by causing him to look ridiculous.

Jarasandha regained control over himself and laid aside all his pride and disappointment. When he met the kings, his attitude was urbane and broad-minded. 'Krishna has come in peace and it is unfair to fight him,' said he, with a show of magnanimity, making light of the situation.

The kings were baffled by this unpredictable transformation ; none could fathom what was hidden in his heart.

The Emperor also advised every one of the kings to join in the reception of Krishna, and this was accepted with a sense of relief. It was the best, the only course to adopt. Some kings thought that Bhishmaka's attitude was cowardly, but there was nothing that they could do about it and the Yadavas were present in overwhelming strength.

Rukmi and Shishupala, however, were furious with the Emperor. Though eventually mollified by a promise that he would see that the plan of matrimonial alliance would go through in good time, both of them withdrew into retirement — one in the palace and the other to his camp, both cursing their respective fathers for their cowardice.

After the assembled kings had dispersed, Jarasandha closeted himself with the closest of his allies, Shalva of Saubha, for a long time. When he opened the talk, he had a scowl on his face. When it ended, his face bore the signs of a problem solved.

On the morning of the fifth of the bright half of the month of Magha, the Festival of Spring was celebrated by the citizens of Kundinapura with great celebrations in the palace grounds of Grandfather Kaishika. On this occasion, the old King welcomed Krishna Vaasudeva with the *abhishek* ceremony with which, as tradition had it, the gods honoured their guests. Huge crowds turned up to witness the reception of the young hero, whose name was already being spoken with ecstatic admiration in every town and hamlet.

After the ceremony, Krishna paid due honour to the kings who had been invited by Kaishika to attend the Festival. Royal dignity was correctly honoured. The kings sat on their thrones in regal robes. The only persons absent were the Emperor Jarasandha, with the Princes Rukmi and Shishupala.

Shouts of 'Victory to Krishna Vaasudeva' rent the air when Kaishika, Bhishmaka and Damaghosha stepped

down from their thrones and enveloped Krishna in a close embrace.

The whole town was gay with rejoicings. There were dances, singing, shouting and laughing everywhere. Feats of arms were performed by the champions among the warriors. Women went about in their enclosure, dressed in variegated colours, decked in ornaments, many of them flaunting pots of burnished brass on their heads. The Garudas danced to their heart's content to the merriment of all.

Krishna, accompanied by Kaishika, Shakradeva, Uddhava and Satyaki, moved about the crowd freely, evoking tremendous enthusiasm. Men and women rushed forward to touch Krishna's feet and asked him to bless their children. Everyone forgot that a *swayamvara* was to be held on that day.

In the afternoon a banquet was given by Kaishika, which all the royal guests, including Jaransandha, Damaghosha and Bhishmaka attended. The Kings and Princes, among whom were Shakradeva and the Kings of Agravana and Dyuna, sat in a separate row, according to precedence, the Emperor being in the centre. On the opposite side sat the guests who did not enjoy princely rank. Krishna sat in the middle of this row, next to his host, Grandfather Kaishika, and his Yadava chiefs at either hand. The Acharyas sat for their dinner in a row to the side.

The women of the royal household, in gay dresses and glittering ornaments, turned out to exercise their high privilege of serving the guests with their own hands. Princess Suvrata, wife of Rukmi, and Princess Rukmini herself, took the lead in serving all the guests with *payasanna* — a rich course of milk, barley and honey, without which no feast in an Aryan home would be complete.

Princess Rukmini served the Acharyas first, as was customary. Next, radiant in her pearls, diamonds and gold, she served the kings and the princes, her head bent in respect, her eyelids lowered in modesty — as befitted a well-conducted princess of rank.

Then she began to serve the guests on the opposite side. When she came near where Krishna was seated, her hand began to tremble. As she served *payasanna* to him, the pot, from which she was serving, fell from her hands. The banana leaf on which food had been served to him, was flooded with the rich liquid from the pot. Princess Rukmini uttered a little cry, tottered and fainted. Before she fell to the ground, her eyes flashed a defiant glance at Krishna.

There was a stir among the ladies of the royal family and many of them rushed forward to take Rukmini away. The sympathy of everyone present went out to the modest princess who had suffered such a mishap.

'I am sorry, your banana leaf has been flooded with *payasanna*. You will have to change it,' said Kaishika to Krishna.

'Grandfather, I am overwhelmed by the flood of hospitality so characteristic of your family,' said Krishna merrily.

When Rukmini, taken into the women's apartment, recovered from her swoon, Suvrata twisted her ears and said: 'You stumbled, did you? You wicked girl! I knew you were up to some trick. You did it on purpose to draw Govinda's attention.'

Rukmini's eyes were dancing in merry triumph. 'This morning he told Father: "I have not come to win the princess for myself",' she said imitating a man's voice. 'I have told him by means of a potful of *payasanna* that "I have come to win you myself." Now let us see who wins.'

'You shameless girl,' said Suvrata as she slapped Rukmini in jest. She also was happy beyond words, for she was no longer going to be supplanted by a co-wife from an imperial family.

42

NOW WHAT ?

The Yadava warriors returned from Kundinapura in high exultation, filled with the joy of victory, shouting 'Victory to Krishna Vaasudeva' all the time.

Mathura was wildly jubilant. Festivities were held ; men embraced each other or slapped each other's backs in pride ; women sang songs of victory ; children grew gay.

The returning warriors talked bravely of how they had maintained the honour of Mathura, broken up the *swayamvara* and inflicted an inglorious humiliation on the Emperor.

When Krishna prostrated himself before Ugrasena and the older chiefs, their eyes were wet with tears. Vasudeva embraced him, breathing in the scent of his hair by way of blessing. Mother Devaki clung to Krishna, placed her head on his shoulders and cried like a little child. The younger Yadavas, their hearts bursting with pride, followed Krishna wherever he went, worshipping the very ground on which he trode.

In spite of the incense offered, Krishna, strangely for him, was silent. He closed himself even to Uddhava, who watched this transformation with anxiety.

The next day after the victorious Yadavas had arrived in Mathura, the principal Yadava elders met in a secret conclave to hear the whole story from Krishna's mouth and to decide on their future plan of action.

After Krishna had told them what had happened, Ugrasena repeated what he had said a hundred times bebore : 'Govinda, my child, you are the crown jewel of the Yadavas. You have saved the honour of Mathura.' And the Yadava chiefs murmured approbation with the word '*sadhu, sadhu.*'

In reply, Krishna, with folded hands, smiled sadly and said : 'It is true that we have saved our honour. But we have invited annihilation.'

The king was surprised, and so were all the others, except Vasudeva, Akrura and Uddhava, who had already guessed what was in Krishna's mind.

'Why do you say such gloomy things at this auspicious moment ?' asked the King. 'This is the zenith of Yadava glory.'

For a moment Krishna looked down in hesitation, pondering whether to take the Chiefs into his confidence or not. Then in solemn tones he said : 'We have reduced Jarasandha's plan to nothing ; in return, he will burn down Mathura to ashes.'

There was an ominous hush over those assembled as the meaning of this grim remark sank into every heart.

'Are you sure, Govinda ?' asked old Kadru, the cautious minister, who always thought of dangers even in an hour of victory.

'Yes, if I know Jarasandha right,' replied Krishna. Then he turned to the others. 'Please keep what I have said to yourselves, venerable masters. I may be wrong. Anyway, I do not want to damp the spirit of the Yadavas. I want them to grow strong and self-confident.'

'So it was unwise to have gone to Kundinapura,' said old Gada.

'Venerable uncle, let us not go over the past ; it won't help any one. You were the foremost amongst those who wanted to vindicate our honour. You left things to me,' said Krishna, slowly, weighing every word, 'and I did whatever I could, for it was plainly the only action which we could possibly take. If we had sat quiet, our honour would have been tarnished. Jarasandha would have forged a formidable alliance to destroy us. We would have failed in our Dharma to prevent a false *swayamvara* in our own family, for Shishupala, after all, is half a Yadava, being the son of Father's sister.'

'I agree with you, Krishna, that the danger of Jarasandha was there and will be there. We cannot easily escape it. We have to meet the danger every time it comes,' said Akrura. 'With the God of all gods to help us and with you as our leader, we shall be able to meet every danger.'

'Oh yes! we will escape every danger, with Krishna to lead us,' said Ugrasena, his voice full of affection and confidence.

'How do you think he will attack us? The Kings of Vidarbha, Chedi and Avanti are not likely to be his staunch allies any more,' asked Vasudeva.

'It is true that we have weakened the alliance for the moment. I do not know what steps Jarasandha will take now. If I know him right, one thing is clear to me. He will make a determined effort to destroy us completely,' said Krishna. 'But, venerable masters, let us keep this anxiety to ourselves.'

The apprehension which Krishna and the elders felt, remained buried in their anxious hearts, as Krishna went on strengthening the armed might of the Yadava chariot warriors.

A few months passed. A distinguished visitor from Hastinapura, accompanied by a few companions and retainers, arrived in Mathura without previous intimation. Instead of making a very ceremonial entry, the leader, who rode in the first chariot, entered the city gates and had it driven to Vasudeva's mansion.

The new visitor was sturdy and fairly tall, broad-chested and muscular. He wore a very genial smile on his face. When the chariot bearing him halted in front of Vasudeva's mansion, he jumped down from it and rushed into the outer court, shouting at the top of his loud and joyous voice: 'Uncle Vasudeva, Aunt Devaki, where are you? Brother Balarama, Uddhava, Krishna, I have come. Where are you all? Krishna, Krishna, where are you?' Every wall echoed to these loud and hearty shouts; never

had any one shouted in such a loud voice in front of Vasudeva's respectable mansion.

Krishna was the first to come out of the mansion, and seeing the visitor, who was more like a baby elephant, immediately recognised him.

The visitor rushed forward, smiling broadly, with his arms open to embrace Krishna. Krishna, the younger cousin, wanted to touch the elder's feet, but before he could do so, the visitor enveloped him in his gnarled arms, took him off the ground and hugged him warmly till Krishna was red in the face.

'Krishna, you look the same as you always did,' said the young giant. 'You do not seem to grow as I do — except in fame. Let me tell you straight, I am tired of hearing your praises spoken by every one in Hastinapura. You should have left some share of it to us.'

'Bhimasena, how mighty you have grown! What a joy! How are Aunt Kunti and your brothers?' asked Krishna.

'Nothing goes wrong for them when I am there. Now that I am away, everything will go wrong in Hastinapura,' replied Bhima with a loud laugh as he followed Krishna into the mansion.

That was how Bhima, the second son of Kunti, the eldest sister of Vasudeva, and of Pandu, the deceased brother of King Dhritarashtra of Hastinapura, burst upon Mathura. He had come, he said, to complete his training in wielding the mace under Balarama who had by then become an acknowledged master of the art.

Bhima was a tornado of high spirits with a never-failing laugh and a heart as big as the Himalayas. He made friends with all he met, saying the most absurd things in a droll way. And all the habitual restraints of Vasudeva's household were torn to shreds.

Bhima incessantly talked about himself and his four brothers. The five brothers, the Pandavas, had completed their education under the great master of the martial art, Guru Dronacharya. He, Bhima, and his brother, Arjuna,

had, in a test held in front of all the assembled chiefs, proved that they were the best of warriors. Then, led by their Guru Dronacharya, they had humbled the pride of Drupada, the King of Panchala, in a swift attack. The people of Hastinapura loved them, but not their cousins, the sons of Dhritarashtra.

Yudhishthira, his eldest brother, Bhima said, had been installed as Crown Prince of Hastinapura. However, things were not so easy as people thought. Their winning the contest and Yudhishthira being installed as Crown Prince, had led to a flood of intrigues sponsored by Duryodhana, the eldest son of their uncle Dhritarashtra, and his maternal uncle Shakuni. When he left for Mathura, he said, the intrigues had reached a boiling point. Grandfather Bhishma and uncle Vidura were helpless against Duryodhana's wily moves. No one knew what was going to happen next.

When Bhima was alone with Krishna he grew serious. 'Govinda, I have brought a message from uncle Vidura — a message only for your ears,' said Bhima, lowering his voice in an effort to whisper. 'That is really why I have come. But keep it a secret.'

Vidura was the most influential minister of Hastinapura. He was begotten by the Best of Munis, Veda Vyasa himself, of a maid-in-waiting in the royal palace when, according to ancient custom, the Muni performed the ancient rite of *niyoga* with the widows of his step-brother, the deceased King of Hastinapura. In that sense therefore Vidura was a half-brother of King Dhritarashtra and the late King Pandu. Wise and far-sighted, he had been watching over the fortunes of Hastinapura with the solicitude of a mother.

'What is it, Brother?' asked Krishna. He had already guessed that the visit of his cousin had a deeper significance.

'Uncle Vidura told me again and again that I should tell the secret to you and to no one else. They know that I

can't keep secrets. But I have kept this one,' said Bhima, laughing heartily at his own achievement.

Krishna smiled. 'My Brother, if *you* could keep a secret, it must be a secret indeed. Let me hear it.'

Bhima lowered his voice almost to an inaudible whisper. 'Uncle Vidura has received information from his spies that Shalva, King of Saubha, saw Kala Yavana, that wicked king who rules the earth beyond the river Sindhu. That demon is now collecting a large army to invade some kingdom in Aryavarta. Uncle Vidura thinks that it is most likely to be Mathura. He has asked me to warn you about this danger.'

Krishna heard the news in silence. Then, after a little while, he said: 'Brother, give me a promise. Don't tell the secret to anyone. Forget it altogether. Don't think of it even in dream,' insisted Krishna solemnly.

'My difficulty is that I speak even in dreams. That I can't help,' said Bhima. 'But every day I go on repeating to myself that this is a secret. That will perhaps prevent me from speaking in my dream,' he added.

'Well, dream of it, if you must, but don't say even to yourself what it is,' said Krishna, raising a warning finger.

'Now you know why I have come, Brother Krishna. And I feel relieved that I have unburdened myself of the secret; it was weighing heavily on my heart,' said Bhima with a laugh. 'You know we are so proud of you, Brother Krishna. You have been working wonders. I wish I were with you here to help you break the heads of your enemies.' Then, by way of re-assurance, giving an affectionate slap on Krishna's back, he said: 'Don't worry. I will keep the secret.'

A fortnight later, Shrutashrava, the Queen of Chedi, came to pay her annual visit to her brother Vasudeva. She was bubbling over with pride at Krishna's exploits in Kundinapura and described in detail how her husband, Damaghosha, was the first to tell Jarasandha, when Krishna arrived, that he would not fight him; how her son Shishu-

pala, anxious to marry Rukmini, was so angry at everyone else that he retired sulking to his tent; how the Emperor Jarasandha agreed to postpone the *swayamvara* and joined the dinner given in honour of Krishna.

'Well, Krishna, one thing has happened,' said the Queen with a sigh. *Aryaputra*[1] has lost all confidence in the Emperor. So has King Bhishmaka. We are now in imperial disfavour, and Shishupala is not on speaking terms with his father. But you know how clever Jarasandha is. Now the only king in whom he places confidence is Shalva of Saubha. When departing, he called Shishupala to his side and said: "My son, don't worry. Next year, in the month of Magha, I shall see that you wed Bhishmaka's daughter, whether Krishna is dead or alive".'

'How do you know all this, Aunt Shrutashrava?' asked Krishna.

'Shishupala told me himself when I asked him to give up the idea of marrying Rukmini. He said that the Emperor was not going to forget or forgive the humiliation which you had imposed upon him. And I don't like Jarasandha saying to Shishupala "whether Krishna is alive or dead." It bodes ill,' said the Queen.

'I also do not like it, but I see what it means,' said Krishna quietly.

A chilly shiver swept over Krishna as he realised what this information meant. Jarasandha had given up his plan of building up a confederacy. In the new plan which he was making, evidently, he had written off the aid of his Aryan allies, the kings of Vidarbha, Chedi and Avanti; that is, he was now contemplating individual action. In this action Shalva was his only confidant. That fitted in with the secret message which Bhima had brought from Vidura. There was no other possible explanation for his secret talks with Shalva, Shalva's visit to Kala Yavana, and the demon's mobilising his savage hordes. Jarasandha had gone back to his old strategy of overwhelming the enemy by sheer, swift, brutal force. He was planning that he would march on Mathura from the east, and Kala

Yavana and Shalva from the south-west. That would cut off all retreat for the Yadavas and place them at the mercy of the invaders.

To think of destroying the Yadavas in this way was a barbarous move, but Krishna realised that Jarasandha, in spite of his close contacts with the Aryan kings, had no respect for the code of Aryan morals. He was capable of a demoniac plot, and Kala Yavana of ill repute, ruling over the swampy lands across the western deserts, had the reputation of being a demon himself. If this move succeeded, no Yadava would escape and Mathura would be razed to the ground.

It was terrible, Krishna thought. Mathura, which he loved so well, and the Yadavas whom he had redeemed so far, would be wiped out from the face of the earth. In spite of his being their saviour, he, Krishna, would have brought about their doom!

With a little effort Krishna overcame the anxiety that was gripping him. He dared not share it with anyone. He could not do anything to allay it. He could see no way to avoid the calamity. He must wait for the doom — go down before it.

All hopes of any assistance from Hastinapura had been dashed. It was riven by internal jealousy. His cousins, the Pandavas, whom he had expected to come to his help, were themselves in a precarious position.

Drupada, the King of Panchala, had been recently shattered in a conflict with Hastinapura and was not likely to offer any resistance to Jarasandha's demand for a passage for his armies through his territory.

None of the other kings — small in resources and strength — were likely to come to the help of the Yadavas. If Jarasandha and Kala Yavana marched against Mathura, one from the east and the other from the south-west through Shalva's dominion, they would be trapped. The prospect was fearful. However, he had to keep it locked up in his breast. If the Yadavas came to know of it, they would be

in a panic. Life in Mathura would immediately disintegrate. Any determined action would just be impossible.

It was a terrible burden to bear, thought Krishna. He reviewed the life he had lived ; it had been a succession of miraculous triumphs, a vindication of Dharma. But now, what ?

43

THE YADAVAS LOSE FAITH

Again and again Krishna thought of the decline of Dharma. There was *adharma* creeping even over Hastinapura, though the venerable Bhishma, recognised as Dharma-incarnate, presided over it. Even the Best of Munis, Veda Vyasa, in spite of his great moral and spiritual influence, was not able to curb the lawlessness of kings.

Now Jarasandha, if the reports were true, with the help of Kala Yavana, was going to let loose his hordes, to burn, plunder, massacre, enslave and rape. For, Kala Yavana's marauding hordes were barbarous in the way they waged war, if Guru Gargacharya, who in his young days had lived at the court of his father, spoke the truth.

For some days, unknown to his dearest friends, Krishna suffered an agony of restlessness. The faith, which was his in the days of Govardhan or Gomantaka or when he wrestled with Kamsa or fought the God of Death, momentarily grew dim. But following on this restlessness it began to burn bright as ever before. Dharma had to be established, *adharma* had to be uprooted. That needed action, prompt, decisive and supremely effective. 'If I don't face life with such an action, how will others face it? Jarasandha must be fought with weapons which render his violence impotent.'

But where were they? And what were they?

It was after the rains ceased that rumours began to reach Mathura of Jarasandha beginning his march towards Madhyadesha at the head of a large army. This time he had sought no aid from the kings of Aryavarta and relied on no alliance with any of them. Krishna alone knew that Kala Yavana, the frightful, was gathering his savage

hordes, ready to march across deserts and swamps towards Shalva's kingdom, ultimately to join Jarasandha in destroying Mathura.

When Krishna knew that the hour to act had come, he requested King Ugrasena to convene a council of Yadava chiefs and told them that their invaders were converging on Mathura to destroy the Yadavas.

Everyone was in dismay and panic as if lightning had struck the Palace.

'God of all gods, we are trapped!' said old Kadru.

'Let us send messengers to the venerable Bhishma and King Drupada, requesting them to come to our rescue,' said Akrura. For once, even his faith in Krishna was shaken.

'Drupada is crippled as a result of his war with Dronacharya,' said Krishna. 'The venerable Bhishma is in difficulties himself. Hastinapura is torn by internal feuds between the Kauravas and the Pandavas after Yudhishthira was installed *yuvaraja*. He won't help, I am afraid.'

'Oh, God of all gods!' exclaimed Ugrasena.

'I am surprised that King Damaghosha has consented to be a party to such a move,' said Vasudeva.

'Father, the noble king of Chedi does not know of this plan. This time, Jarasandha does not rely upon the aid of any Aryan king. Only Kala Yavana and Shalva are joining him from the south-west to cut off our retreat,' said Krishna in solemn tones.

'That leaves us no escape,' said Shanku. Krishna gave no reply.

'There is then only one way open to the Kshatriyas,' said Vasudeva in grim tones. 'We can die fighting.'

'And leave our women and children in the hands of the conquerors?' said Satrajit angrily. He was the leader of the section of Yadavas who had returned to Mathura after Kamsa's death. 'We knew that we were going to be destroyed, when we left our fortunes in the hands of raw boys.'

'You coward!' shouted Balarama at Satrajit. There was an uproar among the chiefs at this outburst and many of them, in excitement, shouted at each other. With great difficulty King Ugrasena restored some order in the assembly.

'Krishna, what is the way out?' asked Ugrasena when the excitement subsided a little.

'It is only our faith, Lord, that can find the way, I can't,' said Krishna in a quiet voice. There was a hush as everyone wanted to catch the words he would speak, for, unconsciously, every one felt that he, Krishna, alone could find a way out. 'For I see that our faith is shaken,' he added.

'How can we have faith, when we are facing annihilation?' asked Kadru in a trembling voice.

'Krishna has been responsible for all our misfortunes,' shouted Satrajit again as he stood up to go.

'Don't talk like that, Satrajit. Only a few months back, we hailed him as our saviour,' said Akrura.

'You did, I did not,' said Satrajit, and stalked out of the assembly angrily, followed by a few other chiefs.

Someone shouted, 'Brihadbala can save us. He can go to Jarasandha and beg for peace. He saved us once before.' A few young chiefs supported him, and the elders, puzzled, remained silent.

Ugrasena looked at Krishna to see whether he had a solution ready, but he would not speak a word, and, at Vasudeva's suggestion, the assembly was adjourned for the next day.

That night panic spread to every family in Mathura. The Yadavas were like a huge flock of sheep which had heard the distant roar of the lion and did not know where to fly. Murmurs and shouts floated through the air.

Krishna, in the solitude of his heart, felt a sad but all-embracing compassion for these panic-stricken Yadavas. Things were all wrong. Jarasandha and his men were inflamed with wrath. Among the Yadavas, some were driven

by fear, others by a desire to cling to life at any cost. None of them knew Dharma, nor had they the faith that Dharma would save them. The ancient wisdom — *yato dharmah tato jayah,* where there is Dharma there is victory — was, to them, meaningless.

In the morning, Krishna saw this clearly even in the eyes and attitude of the members of his own family. Unconsciously, all of them had banded themselves together in a protective formation to make him feel that he would not be abandoned to his enemies. His Father, now and then, threw at him a look of forced cheerfulness. His Mother showed more than her usual solicitude for him. Balarama began to play the protector. Uncle Akrura was no longer his saintly and detached self; by his actions and words he tried to keep up his strength. Uddhava strengthened him by mute assurances that, whatever happened to him, he, Uddhava, would stand by him. And all the others acted as if Krishna needed inner strength and external protection at this crisis.

Compassion for his kinsmen welled up in Krishna, as he sadly noted that, in their overpowering love, they felt that he lacked these things. In fact he needed neither strength nor protection. What he missed in them was faith in Dharma. To them he was not Dharma, but a weak man being strangled by circumstances. In spite of their love for him, they did not know that he did not lack strength himself. He only wanted them to have the rock-like strength of an unshakable faith that Dharma was irresistible, always conquering.

All the same he realised keenly that he could not give even to those nearest him, much less to all the Yadavas, this faith which he felt himself; the faith which had come to him early in a life of acting by the clear light of reality in scorn of consequences. Without this faith, they could not act decisively when faced with difficulties, poor struggling men.

When he wanted to go to the river Yamuna for his bathe as usual, his Mother tried to stop him. He could

see that she was afraid that the Yadavas, in their anger and frustration, might insult or harm him. But he smiled and insisted on following his daily routine. This was the last day of Bhima's visit to Mathura and he would not miss a swimming race with him in the Yamuna for anything in the world.

Accompanied by Uddhava and Bhima, Krishna went to the river. On the way he saw little groups of Yadavas discussing the coming calamity by the roadside or on the verandas of houses. He noticed frightened or angry voices suddenly becoming silent when he was within hearing distance. He saw them all looking at him with anger or hate or distrust. He found that even Satyaki, who everyday joined him at the river, was absent. Evidently he did not want to be seen in company with him that day.

When he stepped out of the river, the men who had been bathing there gravitated towards him. Angered by his presence, even the women came to where he was standing, holding their little ones by the hand or in their arms. Soon their numbers swelled. They drew closer to him, a dense, boiling mass of men and women pushing each other.

'Krishna, you brought us to this plight,' said an old man. 'We are going to be destroyed now, because of you.'

'Me and my children, what will happen to us ?' wailed an elderly matron.

'In Kamsa's time we could go on living; now we shall all be killed,' exclaimed another.

Simultaneously angry remarks were hurled at him. 'Yes, Jarasandha won't spare any of us,' said a third.

'We knew what the end would be when you killed Kamsa.'

'The curse of Goddess Durga will descend upon your children and grandchildren if my children die at the hands of Jarasandha.'

'We are all going to perish in flames.'

'That comes of leaving our destinies in the hands of a cowherd.'

Krishna stood in their midst, smiling indulgently, compassion in his eyes. But his smile of irresistible charm had lost its magic for the panic-stricken crowd. There was only the wailing of women, the angry voices of men.

He stood in the midst of his people, letting them vent their anger on him. Uddhava and Bhima were anxious to take him away from the spot, ready to defend him if any hand was raised against him. Krishna, with a glance, stopped them from intervening.

Then he spoke slowly and sadly. 'I know what you feel. I also know that I have led you into this disaster.'

'And you want to run away, like a coward, as you did on the last occasion,' said an elderly Yadava.

'I will pledge you my word with the waters of this sacred Yamuna on my hands. Not one of you will die at the hands of the invader so long as I am alive,' said Krishna.

'You give yourself up to Jarasandha and he will spare us,' said a hefty woman, whose eyes were red with anger.

'I shall, if that will save you,' said Krishna as he looked at them firmly but sadly. 'Uncles, mothers, brothers, why have you lost your faith in Dharma? Wherever there is Dharma, there is always victory.'

'That is nonsense,' said a Yadava. '*Adharma* alone wins these days.'

'Never, never,' said Krishna, with flashing eyes, his voice impatient. 'Dharma never dies, and those who live in Dharma never perish.' Then in a voice of authority he said, 'Go back to your homes. Trust in the God of all gods. Have faith in Dharma. It will protect you. And my words to you, pledged before Mother Yamuna, stand: Not one of you shall die at the hands of the invader so long as I live. Now go.' He took a step forward, the crowd gave way and he proceeded homewards.

As he left, he heard a voice telling the crowd. 'The cowherd knows how to speak well, but I tell you, he will run away all the same, when Jarasandha comes.'

And the murmurs and the wailings rose from the crowd once again.

Krishna heard these words and for a moment was lost in thought. After a while he turned to Uddhava and said : 'Men are destroyed because they are their own destroyers.'

The whole day crowds of visitors came to Vasudeva's mansion to bewail, to threaten, to insult. Vasudeva gave them hopes of finding a way out, but none would believe him, and Devaki told them to have trust in the God of all gods, which no one was prepared to do.

Krishna, helped by Uddhava, was all the time busy making preparations for Bhima's departure for Hastinapura. After Bhima had bidden good-bye to the elders, Krishna accompanied him up to the first stage of the journey.

'Brother Krishna, I thought you were happier than we were at Hastinapura, but I was mistaken. You are more unhappy,' said Bhima.

'My brother, I wonder what we mean when we say we are unhappy or happy. Is there not something which neither happiness nor unhappiness touches ? Perhaps, we can secure that something only when trials face us,' said Krishna thoughtfully.

Bhima laughed. 'Don't talk to me about such things. You had better discuss them with Brother Yudhishthira when you meet him. He, like you, understands all these things. I am either happy or unhappy. And so my blessing, Krishna.'

Krishna and Uddhava touched the feet of Bhima, who, with a broad smile on his lips, drove away.

Krishna turned to Uddhava. 'All the Five Brothers, Uddhava, are very noble. If they ever come to power, they will establish Dharma. But when ?'

By the time they returned home, most people in Mathura had retired to rest.

When they were in bed, Krishna turned to Uddhava and said : 'Uddhava, they have all given up *shraddha*, faith in Dharma. Have you lost it also ?'

'No, Govinda, I will never give it up. And I have faith in you.'

'Then don't worry about me. But I must bring these people back to faith. If I can't, I do not wish to live, for the mission of my life will have failed.'

'I understand, Krishna.'

'Uddhava, don't ask me what I am going to do and why. Look after Father and Mother and touch their feet for me. Give my Big Brother and all others my message that they will always be with me. Tell those who care to listen to me that not Krishna, but faith in Dharma alone will save the Yadavas. And if I offer the supreme sacrifice, it will give them that faith which is the mother of all miracles.'

Then Krishna embraced Uddhava, gave him his ornaments and arms, took a staff and, with rapid strides, left the mansion to be lost in the darkness.

44

THE FATEFUL DECISION

The next morning Mathura was shocked into a dazed awakening. Krishna had vanished in the night. No one knew where he had gone.

Like cattle in a jungle hearing the roar of a tiger and finding themselves without a cowherd, the Yadavas ran hither and thither, staring dumbly at each other whenever they met. An unspoken fear was in every heart, deeper than the dread of Jarasandha and Kala Yavana. One thought oppressed them all and that they dared not utter : with Krishna gone, what would become of them ?

Satrajit and his friends made malicious comments : He, Krishna, could never face any danger; he had fled away from it as he had done once before. They saw their hope only in Brihadbala who once, as they believed, had saved Mathura by his friendly intercession with Jarasandha. So they went to Brihadbala and begged of him to renew his contact with the outraged Emperor. But he was in a state of utter collapse. He knew how impotent he was. All that he could do was to ask them angrily to go to their Govinda who they thought was their saviour. Those who went to him in the hope of being saved, came back with curses on their lips.

Satyaki, Virata and their friends, now that Krishna had gone, suddenly awoke to the fate that awaited them. Though they realised the enormity of the danger which was facing Mathura, so long as Krishna was in their midst they had in the last instance the hope of dying sword in hand in defence of Mathura. With him gone and the Yadava leaders in a panic, the only prospect before them was to submit to an ignominious butchery. They felt that they

had been badly let down. In their helplessness they approached Balarama.

The Big Brother was wild with rage at everybody for not having faith in Krishna. When Satyaki and his friends approached him for advice, he stormed as he alone could do. 'You, cowards! You deserted him yesterday. Now you want him back. Find him out yourselves. You fully deserve to be thrown to the murderous hordes of Kala Yavana.'

'But, Big Brother, please give us the lead,' begged Satyaki.

'I will do nothing of the kind. I am soon going to join Krishna wherever he is. You don't deserve Krishna amongst you. I would sooner be with him in the wilderness than with you in Mathura,' shouted Balarama and contemptuously turned them away.

With characteristic instability, the common people swung to the opposite extreme. Krishna, they knew, was a god. He had saved them from Kamsa; he had vanquished Jarasandha and upheld Yadava honour at Kundinapura. He alone could have saved them. With him gone, their fate was sealed. The fault was the elders'. Thoughtless as they were, they had blamed Krishna for being responsible for the calamity and had lost him. Most of them had forgotten how very loudly each one of them had reviled Krishna the day before.

The day passed without any news of Krishna. Women suddenly discovered that Krishna alone had brought luck to the Yadavas; so long as he was in their midst prosperity and victory had come; now that he had gone, bad luck was sure to follow. Some women started a fast, making all kinds of vows if Krishna would only return safely.

The younger women who had been stampeded into a critical attitude the previous day, became disconsolate. When they went to the river, they missed the fascinating smile, the winning eyes, and the sweet words which Krishna had for everyone. Of the younger women, Satya, the fifteen-year-old daughter of Satrajit, was the most out-

spoken. With flaming eyes, she went to her father and laid the whole blame for Krishna's disappearance on him. He hated Krishna, she said, and he had driven him away; the curses of the gods were sure to follow, for he was a god himself.

Satrajit had never ceased to hate Krishna. But the fear of what would follow if Krishna did not return, overshadowed even his hate. However, he tried to hector his favourite daughter. As she was irrepressibly angry, the father had to buffet her into a grumbling, sobbing silence.

Some people who had been with Krishna the previous day on the bank of the river had heard what he had told them: 'Not one of you will die at the hands of the invader so long as I am alive.' Now Krishna had gone to keep his promise, to give himself up to Jarasandha to save them, they thought. A wave of awesome admiration for Krishna swept over the popular mind, though the fear that Jarasandha would not spare Mathura this time was deep-seated.

The Brahmans, headed by the venerable Gargacharya, were highly agitated. They began a sacrificial session to ward off evil from Krishna by invoking Shankar, the dread God.

Thus, in less than forty-eight hours, the fear in the Yadava mind, of being destroyed by Jarasandha, was replaced by a dire anxiety about the safety of Krishna, and prayers were offered for his safe return.

The old leaders, Gada and Shanku, were in despair. In spite of the impending calamity, they had had confidence that Krishna would somehow or other find a way to avert it. Now their hope was extinguished. They went into consultation with the leading chiefs, Kritavarma and Anadhrishta, Samba and Kaksha, and requested King Ugrasena to call an assembly of the chiefs.

The chiefs, when they met King Ugrasena and Vasudeva the next day morning, were in a chastened mood. It was the largest assembly which had gathered in living

memory. A huge crowd of Yadavas had also collected outside the Palace, anxious to know how the chiefs proposed to meet the situation.

'Yadavas, Vaasudeva has left us,' said Ugrasena, addressing the assembly in a sorrowful voice. 'The light of Mathura is extinguished. We do not know where he has gone. But we know why he has gone. He has gone to save us.' The King's voice was choked with emotion. 'We did not deserve to have him in our midst. He redeemed us, gave us unity, strength and glory. We, ungrateful wretches, had no faith in him, and by our lack of faith we drove him out of Mathura. Now we are left without him and do not know what to do.'

For a time no one spoke. Then Kadru, the old minister, asked : 'Who was the last to see him ?'

'Uddhava,' said Vasudeva. 'He will tell you all that happened.'

'What was the last thing he did and said, son of Devabhaga ?' queried the King.

'Lord, we went together and saw Bhimasena off and returned to Mathura late in the evening. When we were on the point of going to bed, he said : "Uddhava, don't ask me what I am going to do and why".'

Uddhava's voice was full of emotion. 'He further said to me : "Look after Father and Mother and touch their feet for me. Assure my Big Brother that he will always be with me in my heart".' As he said these words, Uddhava broke down and the assembly was visibly moved.

Uddhava collected himself and continued : 'He further said : "Tell those who care to listen to me that not Krishna, but faith in Dharma alone will save the Yadavas. And if I offer the supreme sacrifice, I will do it in order that they may have that faith which is the mother of all miracles".'

'And what did he do then ?' asked Kadru.

'He gave all his ornaments and arms to me as a parting gift and left.' Uddhava was now sobbing.

Vasudeva hid his face in his hands as tears rolled down his cheeks. Some of the elder chiefs wiped their tears.

'What did he mean by the supreme sacrifice?' asked Kadru.

'The day before he had said these words to the people on the bank of the river: "Not one of you will die at the hands of the invader as long as I am alive." My son who was there, told me about it,' said Kritavarma.

Satyaki could not contain himself any longer. 'We should have told him that we were prepared to die with him facing the invader. But we were cowards.'

'We were not cowards,' shouted Satrajit.

'You may not be. I was,' said Satyaki. 'The other day I was so afraid of being seen with him that I had no courage even to go to the river with him, as I used to do every day. I was a coward and I am ashamed of being one,' he confessed. 'I wish I had died first.'

'Last time he went away to Gomantaka in order to save Mathura,' said Kadru and added, 'he may have done this time too.'

Vasudeva shook his head. 'Last time he went away because that was the only way to save Mathura which was defenceless. This time the situation is different. Jarasandha and Kala Yavana have joined hands to destroy the Yadavas altogether. No one could think that Mathura might be saved by Krishna's going away.'

'Where do you think he can have gone, Vasudeva? Do you think he may have gone to Jarasandha?' asked Ugrasena.

'I can only guess,' said Vasudeva. 'We all know only too well that this time Jarasandha is implacable. He will not negotiate with Mathura on any terms. But it is possible that Krishna may have gone to surrender himself to Jarasandha so as to mitigate his fury against the Yadavas.'

'Possibly he went to Shalva in order to meet Kala Yavana,' said Gargacharya, who had been studiously silent all that time.

'God of all gods!' said Ugrasena, as a shiver passed through everyone at the dread name of Kala Yavana.

'Venerable Acharya, why do you think so?' asked Gada.

'For the last few days Krishna has been asking me all about King Kala Yavana,' said Gargacharya. 'You remember, noble King, that when I was a young *brahmachari*, I was captured by the men of Kala Yavana's father and taken to his capital, where I lived for some years. His father was not so barbarous as Kala Yavana turned out to be, and he appointed me the young prince's teacher. Then, the Yavana King died. Power passed into the hands of Kala Yavana's maternal uncle, and in disgust I left them to return to Mathura. When I told Krishna of my experiences with Kala Yavana's father, he said in jest that he was Kala Yavana's brother, for both of them had a common spiritual father in me. I never thought at the time that Krishna had any intentions of facing Kala Yavana alone. But now that I think of it, he must have conceived the idea of approaching Kala Yavana directly.'

'But the demon will tear him to pieces,' said Anadhrishta, who had once been to Kala Yavana's court. 'They are all beasts.'

Suddenly Balarama stood up in a fury. 'Why didn't you tell us that Krishna was going to Kala Yavana? Now that I know, I am going to join him wherever he is. Come on, Uddhava, we cannot waste time talking endlessly.' Balarama placed his mace on his shoulder and pulled Uddhava by the hand. 'Come on, Uddhava, our place is with Krishna.' The assembly was taken aback by the fierce manner in which Balarama uttered these words.

'I too will come with you, Big Brother,' said Satyaki, as he stood up.

'Balarama, please wait,' said Ugrasena, holding up his hand. 'We can't let Krishna sacrifice himself. If we are going to die, we must all die together.'

'*Sadhu, sadhu,*' murmured some elders.

'As a heroic people, it will be our greatest glory to die defending our freedom,' said Vasudeva. 'But some of us think differently.'

'No, no. We are ready to die. But we must first have Krishna back,' said Gada.

'Yes, yes, yes,' said a chorus of voices.

'I will ask Balarama, Uddhava and Satyaki to go in search of Krishna and bring him back,' said Vasudeva.

'Balarama, please go and tell Govinda: "The Yadavas want *you* and none else. Please come back",' said Ugrasena.

The moments of torture passed slowly, one after another, as Mathura, swinging between hope and despair, waited for the return of Krishna.

Agonising thoughts were in everyone's mind. Suppose Krishna was not found? Suppose he refused to come? Suppose he had reached Shalva's dominions and been killed by him? What if they never saw him again? The elders were overborne by anxiety, the youngsters by impatience. Women went about their work in tears.

The days and nights crept slowly by on feet of anguish. On the fourth day, the glad sound came, of the notes of *Panchajanya* — Krishna's conch, — which Uddhava had taken with him — floating on the air.

The heart of Mathura bounded with joy. Men, women and children, the chiefs, the elders, the youngsters and the servants, left what they were doing and rushed to the city gates. Krishna had come back!

'Victory to Krishna, victory to Krishna, victory to Krishna,' went up the shouts from all throats as the familiar figure, with only a staff in his hand, came towards them. But it was a different Krishna. He walked with slow steps and a solemn bearing.

People caught their breath when they saw that his air was one of awesome sternness. Krishna fell at the feet of Ugrasena and Vasudeva. They took him in their arms by

turn. Mother Devaki stood at the head of the women, sobbing with joy. Others rushed to touch his feet.

Krishna's eyes were full of sorrow. 'Best of Kings, venerable Father,' said Krishna, 'I have come against my will — dragged hither by your faith.'

'We can't live without you, Krishna, whatever happens,' said Ugrasena.

'Best of Yadavas,' replied Krishna, 'we can't live without the faith that at all times we must be ready to die for Dharma.'

And laughing and sobbing, they brought him back to Mathura, but he was strangely silent.

The King's invitation went out to the chiefs to assemble immediately. The square in front of the Palace was filled with people anxious to have a *darshan* from Krishna, not in his wanderer's dress, but as he had lived in their hearts, dressed in his yellow *pitambar,* his diadem with its peacock feathers and the *vaijayanti* garland round his neck.

Krishna did not disappoint them. He came to the assembly driving his own chariot, accompanied by Balarama, Uddhava and Satyaki. Now in his usual dress, he was the very image of grace and strength, and something more — an embodiment of irresistible power.

People, forgetting the impending danger, shouted madly, 'Victory to Krishna Vaasudeva.' He acknowledged their salutation with folded hands. However, he looked at them sternly and said in a clear, loud voice: 'Not victory to Krishna. There is victory only where there is Dharma.'

Then, he went into the Palace and met the chiefs. As he greeted them, they felt awed at the new presence in their midst, for the smiling Krishna had been transformed into the stern Vaasudeva, the wielder of the *Chakra,* the defender of Dharma.

King Ugrasena gave him a hearty welcome and asked him to forgive them for their lack of faith. Gada, the senior chief, expressed the feeling of all when he said:

'Vaasudeva, we are with you in death and in life. Please don't ever think of leaving us.'

Krishna folded his hands and touched the feet of the King and his Father in a manner which left no one in doubt that the occasion was a very solemn one. 'Noble King, venerable Father, you wanted me and I have come back. I will never leave you — never, never — even if you leave me.'

'Please don't talk like that. You alone can work miracles and save us,' said Kadru.

'I told you once and I tell you again,' said Krishna in a voice of authority, 'that miracles are worked by faith. Without faith, not even the gods can work miracles.'

'We have faith in you. Tell us what to do,' said Shanku.

'Yes, we have faith in you, Vaasudeva,' said Gada.

'Yes, yes, yes,' said some of the elders.

'Vaasudeva, please forget what has happened in the past. We are all united — till death itself,' said Satyaki.

'Krishna, my son,' said Vasudeva in a feeling voice, 'you have tested us enough. We know that there is no way but to die fighting, and we shall do it with you as our leader, facing Jarasandha and Kala Yavana.'

'Venerable Father, noble King, if we have faith, we can still live and be free,' said Krishna slowly but confidently.

'Tell us, how can we do it?' a few voices asked eagerly.

'Are we prepared to die rather than submit to Jarasandha and Kala Yavana? Are we?' asked Krishna as he looked at Satyaki and Satrajit and the groups which they respectively led.

'There is no other way,' said Satrajit grudgingly.

'Show us the way to live and be free,' said Satyaki.

'I can show you the way if you are ready to die in order to live free,' said Krishna in a voice which had developed a new ring of irresistibility.

'Please, Krishna, tell us what to do and we will do it — even if it be to immolate ourselves on the funeral pyre to save our honour,' said the King. 'I have consulted all the elders and they are also of the same view. We don't want to be butchered like goats.'

'Then, Best of Kings, listen to me. Let us leave our ancient homes, not out of fear as some of us did in the time of uncle Kamsa, but with the solemn determination to live free,' said Krishna.

There was complete silence in the assembly. Everyone caught his breath as he listened to the words which fell from Krishna's lips.

'Kala Yavana will reach Mathura earlier than Jarasandha, but still he will take a month or more. Let us leave Mathura, all of us — men, women, children, servants, horses, cattle and elephants — before he arrives here.'

'But where are we to go to? None of our neighbouring kings will let us stay in their territory lest Jarasandha and Kala Yavana should destroy them,' said Kadru, the old minister.

'There is a land where we can go,' said Krishna. 'A land where the king and the people are ready to welcome you with open arms. My Big Brother has conquered Kushasthali for King Kukudmin. It is a beautiful land, whose shores are laved by the Sea of Surashtra. King Kukudmin is ready to give his throne and his daughter to Balarama. There we will be safe both from Jarasandha and Kala Yavana, and be masters of our own lives,' said Krishna.

'But Kushasthali is far, far away,' said Satrajit.

'It is nearer than the land of the God of Death,' said Krishna with a mocking smile.

No one spoke for some time. Then Krishna continued in a serious tone: 'If you don't want to leave Mathura, make up your mind here and now. I am willing to abide by your wishes. But then be ready to face death, and, before the enemy arrives, let our women and children court

the fire so that they may not fall into the hands of the barbarians. But I give you hope — the hope of a great future. Get ready with your chariots and carts, your cows, horses and elephants, and leave Mathura to its fate, not as frightened refugees, but as heroes seeking a new life of power.' Krishna allowed his words to sink into the heart of every one of his hearers.

Then he lapsed into a friendly mood and smiled. 'It is a race for life. We have to elude the hordes of Kala Yavana. Given faith and energy, we shall win the race.'

'Suppose we don't?' asked Kadru.

'We can die only once,' said Krishna with supreme self-confidence which, while it struck awe into the hearts of his hearers, gave them confidence too. 'There is no choice before us. It has been made for us by the gods. We may die either way, so let us make a bid for life.'

His flashing eyes encompassed the whole assembly. He saw a new hope on the face of everyone. Then he continued: 'My Big Brother and Uddhava know the way to Kushasthali. It is true that it runs through forests, deserts and swamps. But with them as our leaders, we can't lose our way, and there is no time to waste.'

'And what about you?' asked Ugrasena.

'I will keep my word. I will leave Mathura only after all of you have done so. I will watch over your safety, guard the rear and, when need arises, will face Kala Yavana alone if he tries to catch up with you. I don't want to live if the Yadavas are going to die. Noble King, give us your commands and your blessing. On Monday morning before sunrise, four days hence, the Yadavas shall march forward to a new life.'

THE EXODUS

As if they were a giant centipede, the Yadavas crawled through forests, swamps and deserts, to find safety and freedom on the distant, unknown shores of the Sea of Surashtra.

Balarama and Uddhava led the march. King Ugrasena, Vasudeva, Akrura and other old chiefs, with their womenfolk, travelled in chariots ; the youngsters were on horseback ; other Yadavas, with their families, travelled in carts drawn by bullocks or buffaloes. Each family led its horses and mares, its cows, camels and elephants with it.

A huge crowd of dependants, Nishadas, Nagas and others, travelled on foot with their families. The rear was guarded by several young Yadavas led by Satyaki on horseback. Charudeshna, the king of the tiny principality of Agravana near Mathura, who had preferred to throw his lot with the fleeing Yadavas rather than face extermination at the hands of the marauding Yavanas, also kept them company. With them was Krishna on horseback, pledged to see them all to safety.

It was an arduous journey. Some of the people died on the way. So did the cattle, horses and elephants which could not bear the strain of the journey or the heat of the desert. On the whole, however, the Yadavas passed through the dreary waste and thick jungles without meeting with any serious calamity. Ultimately they reached the river Lavanika, which, though usually shallow, was flowing along turbulently on account of late monsoon showers.

Most of the procession crossed the river successfully. However, four days more were necessary before the dependants and their families and their cattle could cross it.

When night came, Krishna called Satyaki aside and said in a whisper : 'Satyaki, I must part from you now.'

'Why ?' asked Satyaki in surprise. 'We will soon be across the river safely, lord,' he added. The young men had now acquired the habit of addressing Krishna as the 'lord'.

'Listen, Satyaki. These people are in grave danger. Last night I saw the western sky faintly lit up. Today, look at the sky again ; it again appears to be lit up. The light, I think, proceeds from the camp fires of the army of Kala Yavana. He is evidently proceeding along the valley of the Lavanika. If so, he will overtake us tomorrow or the day after, before these people can cross the river,' said Krishna.

The guide, who knew the locality, confirmed that this light was the reflection of a large number of camp fires.

Satyaki looked at the western sky and said : 'We will have to hasten.'

'The people who are left on this side of the river cannot cross it in two days ; it will require at least four days. They are not trained warriors and they cannot be hurried into action,' said Krishna.

'The Yadavas have already crossed over to safety. If necessary, we can abandon these crowds to Kala Yavana,' said Satyaki.

'They are our people, part of us, and we cannot allow them to be killed by the demon. And who knows, if we don't all cross over before Kala Yavana arrives, he might give up his march to Mathura and follow us. By all accounts he is a savage brute,' said Krishna.

'What do you suggest we should do, lord ?' asked Satyaki humbly.

'I am leaving you now, Satyaki,' said Krishna. 'I will go and meet Kala Yavana, and somehow or other halt him for two or three days. That will give you time to cross over. And let us hope that the demon does not know about our exodus.'

'But it is very dangerous for you to go and meet him,' remonstrated Satyaki.

'If he is coming by the valley of the Lavanika, as he seems to be doing, he will catch up with you. It is late as it is. I must go,' said Krishna with decision.

'But, lord, he will kill you,' said Satyaki in fear.

'That is what I expect he will do,' replied Krishna coolly. 'Why worry? What is death after all? I shall only change old clothes for new, one body for another.'

'But, what shall we do without you?' asked Satyaki in a frightened voice.

'Don't talk like that. I have already shown you the way,' said Krishna. 'Stand by Dharma and you will never perish. In that faith I have lived, and I want you too to live in it,' added Krishna, putting an arm around his friend.

Satyaki was almost in tears. 'But, lord ——.'

'Satyaki, there is no time to lose. I am taking the guide with me. He will show me the way,' said Krishna.

Satyaki fell at the feet of Krishna, who raised him and embraced him. 'Satyaki, beloved friend, my blessing. Take my final message. Tell the noble King: Now that the Yadavas are free, see that they grow strong and destroy Jarasandha. There will be no Dharma in Aryavarta so long as he is alive.'

'Yes, lord,' said Satyaki, wiping away his tears.

Krishna continued in an affectionate voice: 'Also tell Father and Mother that I will always be with them. Tell my Big Brother to marry Revati as early as possible. Tell her, too, on my behalf, that, as the daughter-in-law, it is for her to see that Father and Mother do not feel the loss of their favourite son. She is a brave woman and will do it, I know,' he added in a feeling voice.

Satyaki suppressed a sob with difficulty.

'Balarama can look after the Yadavas,' continued Krishna. 'Tell him, I send him my prostrations. And Satyaki ——.'

'What are your commands? Tell me, my lord,' said Satyaki in a choking voice.

'To you, I have little to say. You are brave, loyal, generous. Be content to be so. Uddhava is a strong man; he is an ascetic at heart, but without me he will feel desolate. Be to him what he has been to me — an inseparable friend, welded in mind and purpose,' said Krishna.

'Yes, lord,' said Satyaki, now unable to restrain his sobs.

'Come and embrace me, Satyaki. Don't worry about death. What is more dangerous is to live in fear,' said Krishna.

Krishna blessed Satyaki by breathing in the scent of his hair, and his voice grew softer still. 'One more word and I will go.'

'Yes, lord,' said Satyaki.

'You know Princess Rukmini, King Bhishmaka's daughter,' said Krishna in a liquid, reminiscent voice. 'She chose me as her lord when I was only a cowherd and she a royal princess, when I was sixteen and she fifteen. Since then, though living apart, she has lived in me.'

Krishna paused for a moment and then continued: 'Though surrounded by enemies, she has shared my battle for Dharma. This princess, tender, blooming and graceful as the *champak* flower, has fought for us against the mighty Jarasandha single-handed. Had she yielded, we would have been dead long ago.'

Satyaki bowed his head, himself overpowered to hear Krishna talking.

'Once Jarasandha destroys Mathura, he will want to force her marry Shishupala. I know she will not. Her faith in me transcends all human bonds. Once she knows that I have given up life for Dharma, she is sure to follow me,' said Krishna.

Krishna controlled the emotion in his voice and spoke with composure: 'Convey my last message to my Big Brother and Uddhava and to all the Yadavas who will hear

it. She has to be rescued from Jarasandha at all costs. If she has sacrificed herself before she is rescued, bring her ashes to Dwaraka and raise a shrine over them. She is the very embodiment of Dharma. Her blessing will bring glory to the Yadavas.'

Krishna gave a parting hug to Satyaki, who was speechless, and flung himself on the horse which was waiting for him and rode away, the guide running by his side. Satyaki stood looking into the night, his heart breaking.

Krishna rode into the darkness along the path which skirted the bank of the river. He arrived at the camp of Kala Yavana at dawn and sent a message that he, Krishna Vaasudeva, the disciple of Gargacharya, had come to surrender Mathura.

When the message reached Kala Yavana, he was surprised and issued orders to have the visitor brought to him.

Krishna stood in the presence of this Yavana of ill-repute : his fierce mouth, his tangled beard, his sturdy frame and the cruel smile which played around his eyes, all bore out the evil reputation that he enjoyed. He was surrounded by fierce-looking warriors, most of them in skins, some of them almost naked. Most had copper swords and shields of leather ; a few had stone hatchets. Their long, unkempt hair added fierceness to their uncouth faces.

'King of the Yavanas, I have come from Mathura,' said Krishna with due courtesy. 'I am Krishna, son of Vasudeva, the Shoora chief, and the disciple of Gargacharya, who was once your guru.'

'Are you the cowherd about whom I have heard, who killed Kamsa, the son-in-law of Jarasandha ?' hissed Kala Yavana.

'Yes,' said Krishna calmly. 'I have come on behalf of the Yadavas to ask you to take over Mathura.'

The sinister eyes of the Yavana flashed in triumph. 'If you are Krishna, son of Vasudeva, I have promised my friend Jarasandha to kill you with my bare hands. But, why have you come all the way here to tell me to take over Mathura ? I was going there myself,' said Kala Yavana.

'I have come to tell you that you need not take the trouble to conquer Mathura. The Yadavas offer it to you. They would prefer you to take it over before Jarasandha does. I have come to show you the way to Mathura,' said Krishna.

'Have you come to play a trick on me?' asked Kala Yavana threateningly, with his hand on the hilt of his sword.

'How can I play trick on you?' asked Krishna with a smile. 'I am alone and unarmed. You have men as innumerable as the stars in the sky.'

'I shall see what to do with you,' said Kala Yavana threateningly.

He issued some orders to one of his lieutenants in a language which Krishna did not understand. The lieutenant took charge of him. Kala Yavana then held a consultation with his principal lieutenants and the army continued to encamp on that spot for the day.

The next day Kala Yavana called Krishna.

'How can we take over Mathura before Jarasandha reaches there?' asked Kala Yavana. He was today in a less distrustful mood.

'I want to show you the shortest way to Mathura. If you continue to travel by the north bank of the Lavanika, you will take longer to reach Mathura, by about twenty days. I can show you the shortest way which passes through Agravana and will take you to Mathura in just under a month before Jarasandha reaches there,' said Krishna.

'How do I know that you are telling the truth?' asked Kala Yavana suspiciously.

'Come with me, with your guides. Ascertain it for yourself. My guide and I will lead you,' said Krishna.

'If you try to mislead me, I will burn you alive,' said Kala Yavana with an ugly grimace.

'I know it,' replied Krishna coolly with a smile.

'Either way you have sworn to kill me. So it does not matter.'

Kala Yavana laughed aloud at the bold reply. He had never yet met a man who did not tremble in his presence.

'I will come with you myself. But if you make the slightest attempt to run away, I will cut you down,' said Kala Yavana savagely.

For two days Krishna and his guide led Kala Yavana through the desert northwards, to a place where he pointed out the north-easterly route through the desert which joined the main route from Mathura.

On the third day Krishna was happy ; by now Satyaki would have crossed the Lavanika. On the fifth day Kala Yavana with Krishna duly guarded, returned to the camp. The camp was soon disbanded and the sprawling army took to the new route.

Kala Yavana, armed with his shield, sword and lance, kept to the rear. He also saw to it that Krishna, on horseback, guarded by four armed men, was never out of sight.

The Yavana was a very suspicious man and kept a wary eye on his prisoner, but Krishna showed no signs of any intention to escape. On the contrary he appeared to be cheerfully reconciled to his fate. He looked after himself and groomed and fed his horse, as if this was just his normal way of life.

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THE CAVES OF MUCHUKUNDA

Some days later the army reached the main route going to Mathura. Kala Yavana was surprised to see signs of a huge crowd having passed that way ; cooking fires long extinguished ; vultures hovering over the carcasses of cattle and horses ; the bodies of elephants eaten into by jackals ; a few places showing signs of cremation ; even leaves on which food had once been served, flying in the wind.

Kala Yavana ordered his men to search for some fugitives. With great difficulty, two men, residing in some hamlet nearby, were brought before him, their bones rattling in their skins out of sheer fright.

When questioned by the interpreter, these villagers could only say that many men in chariots with cattle and horses had passed along the route several days before. They could not say what the number of them had been.

'Do you know who they were ?' Kala Yavana asked them.

'No, mighty lord.'

'Come, speak the truth,' said Kala Yavana fiercely. He turned to the lieutenant. 'If they don't tell the truth, pull their tongues out.'

The frightened men bowed before him. 'We do not know who they were ; they were mighty lords. We only remember one name, which they often shouted.'

'What was the name ?'

'Krishna Vaasudeva,' said the men.

Kala Yavana looked around to see where Krishna was, and, seeing him on horseback a little way away, shouted to the guards : 'Bring the prisoner.'

Summoned by a lieutenant, Krishna brought his horse near enough to be able to talk to Kala Yavana.

'Was this the man called Krishna Vaasudeva?' Kala Yavana asked the villagers, pointing to Krishna.

The men who had so far been dazed with terror, looked at Krishna and immediately recognised him. There was no mistaking the dark-blue colour and the beautiful face. He was the man who had fed them and their families while passing on the way and his was the name which the trekkers had shouted. They did not know what to say. They were torn between gratitude and terror. Krishna saw the situation and spurred his horse nearer to Kala Yavana.

'Why ask them about me?' he asked Kala Yavana. 'I passed here over a month ago,' he added facing Kala Yavana.

'Who were with you?' asked Kala Yavana, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

'The Yadavas of Mathura,' said Krishna unhesitatingly.

'Then you told me a lie,' said Kala Yavana with a frown.

'No, I did not. Mathura is lying there vacant and undefended, to be taken over by you,' said Krishna.

'And the Yadavas have fled away, is that so? You traitor,' said Kala Yavana and, drawing his sword, spurred his horse towards Krishna.

Krishna had been waiting for the fateful moment, which had come. He dug his heels into the sides of the horse, which reared, took a leap, cleared the ring of guards around him and galloped away southward. Krishna had not groomed and fed his horse all these days for nothing.

For a moment Kala Yavana and his men were taken aback. Then, the Yavana ground his teeth in mighty anger, spurred his horse to a gallop and went after Krishna. Some of his guards followed him.

Krishna had the advantage of a light body and was unencumbered by arms. His pursuers were all heavily-built and armed with shields, swords and lances and massive leather helmets.

The horse caught the spirit of the rider, sped like an arrow, straight and swift, and soon outdistanced the pursuers. When the sun set, Krishna halted near a spring, watered and groomed the horse, and then left it free to graze by the wayside. He lay down on the ground and closed his eyes for a little rest.

After some time he led the horse by the bridle lest it might stumble, and was proceeding leisurely in the darkness, when he heard the neighing of a horse at a distance. Evidently one of his pursuers was on his track.

Krishna mounted the horse and continued warily. *Ghatika* after *ghatika* passed. He could still hear the tramp and the neighing of the pursuing horse, which was also walking slowly and cautiously.

When dawn broke, Krishna became aware that his horse was gaining on his pursuer's. Then his horse stumbled and fell. He realised that the pursuer would soon come upon him. He looked around in the dawn light. A path, just wide enough for one man or a goat, ran into the forest.

Looking back with compassion on the horse whom he was leaving to its fate, he took to the forest. He walked carefully, lest he might be hurt by the rocks and thorns on the way. He heard his pursuer's horse halting where his own horse lay ; then a curse muttered in an angry tone, which he recognised as Kala Yavana's, and footsteps coming towards him along the very path he had taken.

Krishna ran as fast as the terrain would let him. The sun rose, throwing a golden light on the forest path. He stopped for breath and looked around. The pursuer, who he could see clearly was Kala Yavana himself, was now gaining on him. In order to relieve himself of the encumbering weight, he had thrown away his shield, helmet and sword. It was now a race of muscle and staying power.

Krishna looked around to see if there was some way of escape. He saw a hill a little further away, on the top of which he noticed certain caves, from which smoke was

curling up to the heavens, indicating that they were inhabited. That was his chance, he decided.

Making a superhuman effort, Krishna ran towards the hill. He reached its foot, halted and looked back. Kala Yavana had slowed down a little; evidently he was becoming exhausted.

Krishna began to climb the hill at a running pace on a foot-path which wound round it at an easy gradient. He went a little distance, and then looked down at the path below. His pursuer had halted at the foot of the hill and was throwing away the last of his swords, with which his speed was being encumbered.

Krishna smiled. Now both of them were equally unarmed. If the fight came, it would be a hand-to-hand wrestle. But he knew that the Yavana wore a knife at his hip. He, therefore, did not want an encounter unless he had regained his breath, for there were noises in his ears and oppression on his chest.

Krishna laboured on, halting for breath, slowly gaining the top of the hill. When he reached the top, he saw six caves, in front of some of which fires were burning. Cautiously he slowed down to a walk. He looked back; his pursuer was still only half-way up the hill.

With slow steps, Krishna approached the cave in the middle. It was the largest of the six. He peeped into it. A very old wiry man, practically naked, with a yellow mane and a beard reaching down to his waist, was lying asleep, his body covered with ashes. In the corner of the cave was a fire, which had burned down to its embers.

Krishna took off his yellow silk scarf which he had tied round his waist, and covered the old man with it. Then, noiselessly, he walked to a recess in the cave which was enveloped in darkness.

There, he waited to regain his breath, watching the entrance to the cave all the time. Time passed. He recovered his breath; now he was ready to face an encounter with the Yavana. Then he heard the hard breathing of a man who had just come up the hill running. He saw the

mouth of the cave darkened by a shadow and made ready for the conflict.

Kala Yavana stepped into the mouth of the cave, looked warily and saw resting what he thought was Krishna, covered by his yellow scarf.

Kala Yavana whipped out his knife from its sheath, rushed towards the man who was sleeping, gave him a kick and thrust the knife into his side.

'You wretch!' shouted Kala Yavana.

The old man sat up, blood dripping from his arm. His ancient eyes, covered by yellow, bushy eyebrows, opened in anger. In spite of his age and heavy mane, he sprang tiger-like at Kala Yavana; twisted the arm which held the knife; pushed the demon into the corner with unexpected vigour; threw him on the embers and kept him pressed there, till the Yavana shouted in agony.

Four old men — all naked — ran into the cave, brandishing copper tridents, and thrust them viciously into Kala Yavana till he was bathed in his own blood. He fainted, his body scorched.

The old men lifted the unconscious man and rolled him unceremoniously down the hill.

Krishna came out, prostrated himself before the old ascetic, tore off a strip from his *pitambar* and fell on his knees before him to bandage his wound.

'Who are you?' asked the ancient ascetic. 'Hara Hara Mahadeva,' he muttered himself.

'Venerable master, I am Krishna Vaasudeva,' said Krishna, bandaging the arm of the ascetic carefully.

'Krishna Vaasudeva!' muttered the ascetic, as if he was taxing his memory. 'Bhadra, Bhadra,' he called to one of his old disciples. He screwed up his furrowed brow and asked his disciple: 'Vaasudeva, Krishna Vaasudeva, where did we hear the name, Bhadra?'

'Venerable master, two years ago when we went to Prabhasa, they told us of a great hero,' said Bhadra, trying to recollect what he had heard two years ago. 'They said

that he had conquered the God of Death and even the wicked king of Magadha — Oh, I forget his name.'

'Why do you say that you are Krishna Vaasudeva?' asked the old ascetic.

'Because I am he,' said Krishna. 'I am not a hero, I am a Yadava of Mathura, the younger son of Vasudeva, the lord of the Shooras. It is true, however, that I defeated a king of Nagaloka who was called the God of Death, and drove back Jarasandha of Magadha.'

'Oh, yes, now I remember. The wicked king's name was Jarasandha,' said the disciple.

'Then why are you here?' asked the ascetic.

Krishna shortly told the ascetic what had happened to him after the defeat of Jarasandha and how he came to be at the caves. When he had finished his narrative, the disciples, under the orders of the ascetic, made him at home.

The next day they recovered the body of Kala Yavana and cremated it with due ceremonies.

Krishna was surprised at the curious ways of these ascetics. For long hours they sat surrounded by a fire in the blazing sun, muttering the name of Mahadeva, the great God.

One day, out of curiosity, Krishna respectfully asked the old ascetic: 'Master, please tell me why you live here.'

'My son, we have been here for many many years,' said the old ascetic reminiscently. 'Perhaps your father was not even born when we came here to these caves. They were then known as the caves of Muchukunda, the name of a great King in the Satya Yuga, who fought for the God Indra and came here to rest. Now people also called me Muchukunda.'

'But why did you select such a lonely spot?' asked Krishna.

'Because I saw the futility, the wickedness, and the ugliness of life as it was led by men. I was once a powerful chief, had wives, sons and friends. But I gave them up in search of peace and I have found it here,' said the old ascetic.

'Master, life is not futility,' said Krishna respectfully. 'It should be lived fully with strength and vigour and with beauty. That is Dharma, as I understand it.'

The ascetic shook his head. 'When you reach maturity, my son, you will see how futile life is. Then if I am alive, I will make you welcome here. To give up life, which is all misery, is real Dharma,' added the ascetic.

'Master, forgive me. I have never been able to understand that. If to escape life is Dharma, why did Brahma create it?' asked Krishna.

'How would you lead your life, son?' asked the ascetic.

'I want life to be lived as it is, so long as it is lived in Dharma. That makes it worth living,' said Krishna.

The ascetic laughed dryly. 'You have no experience of the world, my son. You have not seen its wickedness as I have,' he said passionately, thinking how misled Krishna was. 'If you want peace, give up life.'

'Master, I have found peace without giving up life,' said Krishna.

'How can that be?' asked the ascetic.

'Yes, through right deeds done in the best way I know, regardless of what they bring,' said Krishna.

'You are a wonderful boy, my son,' said the ascetic. 'You have found life by living it. That is a strange doctrine.'

'Yes, I am trying to live it, Master.'

Krishna became very anxious to leave the ascetics and join his people in Kushasthali. However, he had to postpone his departure. Some of the disciples of the ascetic, who used to go every day to the plains, told him of the roving bands of Yavanas, wandering about in the vicinity to find the whereabouts of their king. It was, therefore, very dangerous, Krishna thought, to leave for Surashtra.

During his stay with the ascetics Krishna entered into the spirit of their ways, though he respectfully differed from their philosophy of life. Like the disciples he threw

off his clothes, smeared his head and body with ashes, handled an old trident and sat meditating on the great God in their manner. The old ascetic was pleased to see such a willing disciple.

After a few weeks, when the ascetic and his pupils went on a pilgrimage to Prabhasa to have the *darshan* of Somanatha, the God of gods, Krishna joined them, trident in hand and covered with nothing but ashes.

Having arrived at Prabhasa, he had a bathe at the sacred place where the river Hiranya met the sea, and worshipped at the shrine. He heard of the recent commotion which had seized the town a few days ago. It seemed that a large number of Yadava heroes had gone in ships to some far-off land on some military campaign. He could not understand why, so soon after their arrival in Kushasthali, the young Yadavas should have left it so suddenly. He, therefore, took leave of the Muchukunda *rishi* and went towards Kushasthali, which now was called by the name of Dwaraka.

It was a happy sight which met his eyes. The Yadavas had found a new home in this far-off land.

On the outskirts of the seaport of Dwaraka, stretching towards the mountain citadel of Girinagar, hundreds of hutments had sprung up to house the newcomers. Cows, which he immediately recognised as having been brought from Mathura, were grazing peacefully in the fields. Farms were being hedged in ; in some of them ploughing had begun.

As Krishna went through the outskirts of the town, he was surprised to find an oppressive silence prevailing all over the place. Surprisingly, most of the men he came across had passed middle age or were old. The younger men evidently had all gone to war. The women moved about slowly with tearful eyes as if carrying a heavy load of sorrow. They were clad in black and denuded of ornaments. Clearly there was universal mourning among the Yadavas.

Krishna could not understand the reason of this general gloom. He entered the town and slowly found his way towards the central part where old mansions stood, most of them under repair. For a while he stood in front of a large house, awaiting the arrival of some inmates. Soon he saw a group of men and women returning as if from some shrine.

An old lady, accompanied by a few companions, came to the house in front of which Krishna was standing. They were all in mourning. Their eyes were red with crying. Krishna recognised the old lady who was with her daughter and daughters-in-law. She was the wife of old general Shanku, in the old days the keeper of the fort of Mathura. Many a time she had invited him to dinner and served him food with her own hands.

'Mother, where is the house of Vasudeva, the chief of the Shooras?' he asked the old lady.

She was near-sighted and peered at him for some time. '*Tapasvi* (ascetic), go along this road and turn right. You will find a big house ahead. That is where the Best of Shooras lives. But don't go and beg for food. They are in mourning. I will give it to you myself,' said the old lady and ordered one of her companions to go and fetch food for the ascetic.

'Why? What is the matter? Is some one dead in the family?' asked Krishna.

The old woman sat down on the verandah, placed her hand in sadness on her forehead and broke down.

'There is mourning in every house, my son,' she said in a choking voice.

'Why?' asked Krishna. 'Are all the young men in the city killed in battle?' He did not understand this universal mourning.

'No. They have all gone to Vidarbha to the rescue of Princess Rukmini. She was the chosen bride of our darling Govinda. He has left us and our hearts are broken,' she unburdened herself, trying to control her sobs. 'For

the last two months we have cried and cried till we have no more tears to shed.'

Krishna himself felt like choking at the sight of this dear old woman crying over what she thought was his death.

'What has happened to him?' he asked the old lady, keeping his voice as indifferent as he could.

'Oh, there was no one in the world so wonderful as he. He was our life, our saviour, our God,' said the old lady, again bursting into tears. 'He brought us from Mathura to this wonderful land and he courted death to save us from the wicked demon, Kala Yavana.'

The old lady had broken down so completely that two of her younger companions began to fan her with the fringe of their *saris*. In the meantime, the young woman who had gone to fetch the alms, returned and gave it to Krishna, who received it in the gourd he carried with him.

'Have you returned from some temple, Mother?' he asked the old lady.

'Yes. We have set up a temple where we worship Govinda.'

Krishna could not help feeling a tug at his heart on seeing such touching gratefulness. He took leave of the old lady. She got up and went into the house, helped by one of her companions. It was a strange experience, Krishna thought, to be a living witness of the grief his death had wrought. Now he understood the meaning of the gloom which had overspread the Yadavas. Evidently his last message to Balarama and Uddhava was being loyally carried out by the young Yadavas.

Now, if they had gone to rescue Rukmini, he must hasten there himself. With rapid steps, Krishna went and stood in front of his parental home. Old men came in and out, as was usual whenever his Father sat deciding affairs of state or of the family. He knew them all — kind-hearted, loyal chieftains.

What might Mother be doing, he wondered. Men and women were issuing in groups from a side door, which

clearly led into the part of the house which had been improvised into a shrine. A plump lady came out, accompanied by two or three companions. She was Aunt Kamsaa, King Ugrasena's daughter and the wife of Uncle Devabhaga, who had once tried to see him killed. Poor, poor, Aunt Kamsaa, he thought. She had always lived wrapped up in her mother's love for Brihadbala !

Where would Brihad be, Krishna wondered. Could he have gone with Balarama or stayed behind, as was likely ?

Krishna stepped towards the ladies and asked one of them whether he could go in and have a *darshan* at the shrine.

The lady looked at him and said : 'Yes, you can go in, but the worship is over.'

Krishna extended his hand in blessing and moved aside. He heard the lady asking her companion : 'Where have I seen this *tapasvi* (ascetic) ? He looks so familiar.'

'Oh, these *tapasvis* come again and again to Dwaraka,' said the companion contemptuously.

Krishna stepped through the doorway and waited to have an opportunity to meet his Mother by herself, after the others had gone. At the other end of the room, he saw a throne placed on a small platform. His heart leapt with a strange emotion. On it rested his diadem with peacock feathers, the garlands and the ornaments which he invariably used to wear, and in front was his *Chakra,* the might *Sudarshana,* the weapon he had forged in Gomantaka, and the *Panchajanya* conch which he had secured from the Punyajana *rakshasa.* In front of the throne were placed his bow *Sharnga* and his mace *Kaumodaki.* It was a shrine dedicated to him.

Most of the worshippers had gone now, but near the throne three or four people were seated. He could hear their low, sad voices — his Mother's, his Uncle Akrura's, his Trivakra's — the beloved voices awakening fond echoes in his heart. He heard their chant :

He Krishna, Govinda, Hare, Murare,

He Natha, Narayana, Vaasudeva.

They went on repeating the chant again and again till his Mother, evidently overcome by emotion, broke down. Krishna could not control himself any longer.

'Mother, I have come!' he said in a voice trembling with irrepressible affection.

The three of them turned round and saw him, and the accessories of worship fell from Trivakra's hands with a clattering noise.

Trivakra ran towards him, looked at his face, rubbed her eyes and fell at his feet. 'Krishna! Krishna!'

Before Krishna could lift her up, his Mother, followed by his Uncle Akrura, tottered towards him. She had grown old and feeble; her eyes had been swollen with incessant crying. She opened her eyes in wide surprise.

Krishna rushed towards her. 'Mother,' he cried.

'My Govinda,' she tried to reach him, fainted, and lay at his feet in a heap.

Krishna threw his trident away, lifted her in his arms and carried her into the inner apartment.

47

RUKMINI'S GRIM RESOLVE

There was shattering news. The Emperor was going to march on Mathura, having sworn an oath to reduce it to ashes.

Princess Rukmini, on hearing it, fainted. Jarasandha had clearly intimated to his allies that he did not want them to take part in this adventure. Her brother Rukmi's offer to join the invading army was unceremoniously turned down.

This time there was going to be no nonsense. Evidently the Emperor was determined to go alone and follow his old technique of inflicting a swift penalty with utter ruthlessness.

Then came news which was still more disturbing. Kala Yavana, whose savagery story and song had made proverbial, was going to join hands with Jarasandha. There was no hope left for the Yadavas.

Rukmini poured her heart out to her Grandfather. Old Kaishika himself saw no hope. In sheer anguish of spirit, she spent anxious days and sleepless nights, seeing and hearing her Govinda all the time and shedding tears of woe.

In the month of Kartik, Aplava and Jahnu, the two disciples of Acharya Shvetaketu, returned to Kundinapura. The Acharya, who was now living in the *ashram* of Guru Sandipani at Avanti, had sent a message to her and to her Grandfather. Krishna was leading the Yadavas to distant Surashtra, leaving Mathura to its fate. For the first time for months, Rukmini smiled. Hope revived in her heart.

Her anxiety, however, increased. What would happen to the Yadavas while marching through the deserts ? And,

God of all gods, what would happen to her Govinda? Suppose something befell him on the march?

The month of Kartik went by and Margashirsha came. There was no news of Jarasandha or the Yadavas. Rukmini felt as if she was swinging between life and death.

About the middle of the month of Paush, dreadful news reached Kundinapura. Jarasandha had found Mathura abandoned, but to be true to his oath, had reduced it to ashes. Rukmini, however, found some consolation in there being no news of the Yadavas. No news was good news.

Anxiety, despair and a state of being balanced between uncertainty and hope were telling upon the Princess. Suvrata, the wife of her brother, Rukmi, was no longer friendly. They had grown friends when her *swayamvara* was planned and Suvrata was likely to be superseded as the first wife of Rukmi by the grand-daughter of Emperor Jarasandha. Now that there was no likelihood of her being superseded, Suvrata, to keep her husband happy, had broken with his sister, Rukmini.

Rukmini could get no comfort from her Grandfather. Though resigned, he was clearly in distress himself. His faith in Krishna had been shaken. He saw no hope of Krishna's coming to her rescue.

Rukmini was all alone and she was only twenty years old.

Her woes multiplied soon after. Her father, King Bhishmaka, received a firm and unyielding message from the Emperor. Rukmini's *swayamvara* was to be held on *akshaya tritiya,* the third day of the bright half of the month of Vaishakh. Invitations were to be issued immediately to the princes whom Jarasandha wanted to be present. On his way to Magadha, he himself would come to attend the wedding of Rukmini and Shishupala, the son of Damaghosha.

Messages to the same effect had also been sent to King Damaghosha of Chedi, said the messenger who brought the message to King Bhishmaka. The orders were peremptory.

No choice was left either to King Bhishmaka or to King Damaghosha.

Rukmini bit her lips till blood came, and slapped herself into composure. The prospect before her was grim. Nothing had been heard about the Yadavas. There was no prospect of Krishna coming to her rescue. Death was left to her as the only escape.

Still there was a lurking hope in her heart. Krishna was a worker of miracles. He was a god, as they said and she had come to believe. Even at the last minute, he might come and take her away. But her commonsense told her that it was a foolish dream. No one knew how the Yadavas had fared on their way to Surashtra. It was far, far away on the shore of an unknown sea at the end of the earth.

She summed up the last vestige of hope which she had and sent Jahnu, the disciple, to his Acharya Shvetaketu to convey a message to Krishna, composed by herself.

Lord of the Yadavas, noble son of Vasudeva,
Receive the humble prostrations of thy devoted
Rukmini, daughter of Bhishmaka, the Best of Bhojas.

Seven autumns ago, when I saw thee first,
I gave myself to thee for this life,
And all the lives to come.

Never and never have I forgotten,
Awake or asleep or in dreams,
That I am thine and thou art mine.

The fiat of the demon has gone forth,
The swayamvara *is fixed for* akshaya tritiya,
And I am left with no choice.

I am thy wedded wife before the gods,
I have no more will to choose:
Even if I had, I have already chosen.

Come, lord, with the eagle banner flying,
As soon as thou dost receive this message.
I pine for thee as the calf pines for the cow.

If I am alive, carry me away with thee ;
If I am dead, take my ashes away,
And scatter them where they will lie,
For thee to tread upon.

With this message of love, Jahnu, riding in a chariot of fiery horses, rushed to Avanti.

In spite of all her efforts, Rukmini felt afraid and alone. She did not know to whom to turn in her loneliness. In sheer despair, she turned for help to Shaibya, the Karavirapura Princess, who had seemed so understanding and friendly.

Aplava was sent by her to Karavirapura with another message :

Shaibya, my sister, this message comes from thy younger sister,
Rukmini, daughter of Bhishmaka, the Best of Bhojas.
Darkness surrounds me, the sun no longer shines upon me.
I am alone, helpless, desolate.
In this wilderness I have none to hold my hand,
Even as I go to the God of Death.
Come as fast as thou canst,
Come, in the name of him who wears
The peacock feathers in his diadem.
Come, in the name of him whom both of us
Look upon as the light of our lives.

Aplava with this message memorised, sped through forests and mountains to distant Karavirapura.

Then the blow fell, terrible and devastating. A message came from Shvetaketu :

Noble daughter of Bhishmaka,
Receive the blessing of Shvetaketu
The disciple of Guru Sandipani.
The three worlds have crumbled,
Dharma has fallen to pieces,
The sun and moon now rise in vain.

Vaasudeva, the noblest of men, has been killed,
The demon, Kala Yavana, has done the dark deed.
Rahu has swallowed Surya.

We cry for Krishna in vain,
We wait for him,
Who will never come.
He has gone to the Land of the Manes
And the light of our lives
Is extinguished for ever.
Noblest of princesses, Bhishmaka's daughter,
Let not thy courage fail thee;
Akshaya tritiya *will come and we will meet.*
Whatever thou wishest shall be to me a command.
Thou, to me, art a living half of him,
Who, to me, was VAASUDEVA Himself in name and truth.

Rukmini was crushed. Now she had nothing more to live for. She did not know what to do or where to turn for advice. She moved from place to place, the very image of forlorn hope, more like a frozen tear.

The month of Magha crept on from *ghatika* to *ghatika*, from day to day, bringing her no solace.

Only at the beginning of Phalgun, she received two messages. One was brought by Aplava from Shaibya, the Princess of Karavirapura, saying that she was coming to her accompanied by Rudracharya, the old preceptor of Shakradeva, the King of Karavirapura.

The other message was brought by Jahnu from Acharya Shvetaketu; in fact it was from Balarama, Krishna's elder brother.

Noble daughter of Bhishmaka, Vidarbha's crown jewel of maidens,
Receive the blessing of Balarama
The son of Vasudeva, the Best of Shooras.

Thy message has been received.
But Govinda, of himself, has given up his life,

And for that price, bought all our lives for ever and ever.

Before he left us, Govinda's thoughts were of thee.
To us, he conveyed that thou, noble maiden,
Art his bride before the gods.

We are beholden to him for this:
He, a god unto us, gave us thee—
Our Goddess of plenty and prosperity.
Thy home is with us, noble Bhishmaka's daughter,
As our guardian deity. Keep yourself in readiness:
The Yadavas, in all their might, are coming!

When Rukmini heard this message, tears welled up in her eyes. In his last moment, her Govinda had thought of her and no one else, and, by his touch, made her divine.

Now, Balarama would come, and also Uddhava and Shvetaketu, and the Yadavas in their thundering chariots. They would bear her to Surashtra on the wings of fiery steeds as the guardian goddess of the Yadavas!

This mood of exultation lasted only for a while. Then the stark reality flashed on her mind and she swooned in sheer agony. When she recovered her senses, she realised the situation.

Her Govinda was dead. If Balarama took her away, she would escape the *swayamvara*. But she would be among strangers and not as the sharer of her lord's life, only by virtue of his commands.

The Yadavas were a vigorous people. Govinda's memory would soon fade away from their mind. She would then just be a helpless widow in the Shoora family, who had not shared the marital bed with her husband even for a night!

Rukmini's proud, rebellious spirit rose in her. No, no, that should not happen! Balarama and his Yadavas were noble-hearted, but, without her Govinda, she would have no rightful place with them.

Equally she would have no place among the Bhojas, the clan to which her father belonged. Soon her brother

would become the King of Kundinapura. And she would never submit to his generosity and she would never, never place her right hand in that of a man at the marriage ceremony, for it had been pledged to her Govinda.

She was Krishna's bride. Her place was with him, in life as in death. With him gone, she could not live in this world alone.

Her mind was made up. She saw Govinda waiting in the Land of the Manes for her, his chosen bride.

Many young women had flung themselves at his feet — Radha, Vishakha, Asika, Shaibya. Of them all, he had chosen her — only her — as his consort.

She was made of this earth, but it was he who had made her divine. To him, she had been a goddess; she must therefore live and die as one.

48

HE CAME AND GAVE HER LIFE

In a few days, Shaibya came to Kundinapura with Rudracharya, and lived as the guest of Grandfather Kaishika. Her cousin, Shakradeva, invited for the *swayamvara,* was coming a little later.

Rukmini clung to Shaibya and told her the news. Shaibya, when she heard that Krishna was dead, also broke down. Both of them mingled their tears, shed in the memory of the man who was more to them than life itself.

Now that Shaibya was by her side, Rukmini felt better. She told the older woman of her resolve.

Shaibya already knew of Balarama's determination to rescue Rukmini from the Bhojas.

Uddhava had come to Karavirapura and explained the whole plan. In order to carry it out, Punardatta, Shakradeva's tutor, had already left with the Karavirapura forces to join Balarama.

Between the Yadavas and the Karavirapura forces, they had occupied strategic places in the valley of the river Tapti, the highway between Kundinapura and Surya Tirtha on the west coast. There, Shaibya told Rukmini, ships were waiting to take her to Dwaraka.

When Rukmini told Shaibya what she felt about being rescued by Balarama, Shaibya, with a woman's true instinct, confirmed Rukmini's decision. For Rukmini to have been carried away by Krishna himself to make her his bride would have been one thing. Ancient custom had sanctified such marriages. But to flee with the relatives of the bridegroom after he was dead, was an unforgivable lapse, unthinkable in the case of a royal princess of Rukmini's rank.

Shaibya also agreed with Rukmini that, however great the increasing sorrow of Balarama and the Yadavas might be after Krishna's supreme self-sacrifice, her position among the Yadavas, as the unmarried bride of a dead hero, would be impossible.

Ultimately, after deliberation, both Rukmini and Shaibya came to an agreement on the best solution. In the arms of the older Shaibya, Rukmini acquired the strength to look forward to the last act of her life with enthusiasm. She was going to meet her lord in the Land of the Manes as his chosen bride.

The month of Chaitra came. Day after day passed. Rukmi, the brother of Rukmini, now came to dominate the scene. He began making preparations for the *swayamvara* in real earnest and with great enthusiasm.

Krishna, his lifelong enemy, was dead. Mathura, where he had been insulted by Krishna, had been burned to the ground. The Yadavas were far away, and the miracle-worker was no longer their leader.

He was also glad that Rukmini seemed to be reconciled to the inevitable fate that awaited her. She had now given up all resistance. She had even developed a kind of impatience for the day of the *swayamvara.*

Kundinapura was situated on a narrow delta formed by the rivers Tapti and Purna. The confluence in fact was a *yojana* and a half away from the city. Two fords, one across the Tapti and the other across the Purna, connected the delta on the north and the south, and both of the fords were gaily decorated to welcome the royal guests.

The Emperor arrived with a long retinue and was received with abject cordiality by Bhishmaka as well as the royal princes. His position was now paramount and unassailable. His allies were no more than tributaries, for they no longer had any share in the making of his decisions.

Three days before the *akshaya tritiya,* the day of the *swayamvara,* Damaghosha of Chedi arrived with the bridegroom, his son Shishupala. The King had lost his self-assurance. With the burning of Mathura and the death

of Krishna, any hope of restoring some balance of power had gone.

With his father's feelings so frustrated, Shishupala had emerged as the strong man of Chedi. Slowly he wrested from his father the supreme authority in affairs of state. The way before him was now clear. He would marry Princess Rukmini and Rukmi would marry the granddaughter of the Emperor. Both would be the principal allies of Magadha, and, of the two, he was sure, he would soon become the dominant partner.

Vinda, one of the twin princes of Avanti, arrived with a small retinue. He tendered some excuses for the inability of his brother Anuvinda to attend the *swayamvara;* his father's health was uncertain and he did not leave his bedside. In actual fact, Anuvinda, with a small Avanti contingent, had already established contact with Balarama and the Yadavas.

Acharya Shvetaketu also came with Prince Vinda and was soon in touch with Rukmini through Shaibya. Balarama also was in communication with Shvetaketu and the threads of all the arrangements passed into the latter's hands.

Shaibya and Rukmini took Shvetaketu into their full confidence. Though he approved of their decision, he would not rule out the possibility of accepting Balarama's proposal.

The marriage festivities were really beginning now. From the first day of Vaishakh, dinners, processions, songs, dances and music occupied both hosts and guests. Jarasandha was the centre of the festivities. Most of the kings crowded around him, as he was the complete master of their fortunes.

On the second day, the *mandapa* of the *swayamvara* was duly inaugurated by the Brahmans with appropriate religious ceremonies.

Astrologers fixed the time of the *swayamvara* exactly at mid-day, when, before the assembled princes, Shishupala would shoot an arrow at a fixed target and the bride would choose him as the bridegroom.

The first ceremony connected with the marriage was to take place in the morning of *akshaya tritiya,* the third day. A *yojana* and a half away from Kundinapura, where the waters of the Purna river flowed into the river Tapti, there was the famous temple of the goddess Annapurna, the spouse of the God of gods and the guardian deity of the royal house of the Bhojas.

Custom enjoined that, before the bride went to the pavilion where the *swayamvara* was to be held for selecting the bridegroom, she should offer worship at the shrine at an auspicious hour. That alone could give her a long wedded life of happiness.

On the day of the *swayamvara,* before dawn broke, Uddhava and Satyaki came in a small boat across the wide expanse of waters where the Purna met the Tapti. They tied the boat to a tree and noiselessly crept into the mango grove which surrounded the Annapurna temple.

About the same time, Aplava and Jahnu were busy piling up sandalwood in order to prepare a funeral pyre on the cremation ground near the ford on the Tapti which was a little away from the temple. They were ready for the sacred fire and had a pot of ghee to light it when the hour came.

About the same time, sweet music was played near the window of the apartment in which the bride slept. She was, however, not asleep, but wide awake.

The ladies of the royal family, headed by Princess Suvrata, gave the bride a ceremonial bath, and smeared her body with turmeric powder, the Brahmans chanting the *mantras.*

Then the bride put on a rich dress. She was decked out with ornaments by the ladies, singing bridal songs. Over her rich dress they threw a thick veil of flowers for, according to their beliefs, after the bride had worshipped at Annapurna, she should remain veiled till she selected the bridegroom.

Rukmini was now in an almost ecstatic mood. She was waiting for the moment when she would join her lord.

Even Suvrata was surprised that her husband's sister, who had so far resisted marrying Shishupala, was so cheerfully impatient for the wedding ceremony.

The auspicious moment came. The Brahmans chanted the blessings. The bride climbed into the chariot followed by Suvrata and two other princesses.

The chariot moved on at the head of eight other chariots carrying princesses from different royal families singing bridal songs. The procession was closed by a few guards on horse-back and on foot. The chariots, drawn by richly ornamented bullocks, jingled along the way.

Rukmini was as hysterically gay as only a bride on the eve of her marriage could be. Suvrata felt that her sister-in-law was going mad, and ironically cursed her fickleness. If Rukmini was willing to marry Shishupala, her own fate was sealed. She would soon become the superseded wife of Rukmi.

The procession halted before the porch of the Annapurna temple. The bride, walking on a carpet of flowers, was received with due ceremony by Rudracharya, the preceptor of Karavirapura, and Acharya Shvetaketu, and taken into the inner shrine, the other ladies following.

The inner shrine of Annapurna was in semi-darkness, lit up by two *ghee* lamps placed in front of the goddess. The bride, her face heavily veiled with flowers, knelt before the goddess. The Acharyas chanted Vedic *mantras* and completed the preliminary ceremony.

Then they led the bride Rukmini through the sacred *parikrama marg* surrounding the pedestal on which the image of the goddess stood. The royal preceptor led the bride. Rudracharya and Shvetaketu brought up the rear.

The circumambulatory path was narrow and dark, lit at places only through narrow doors, which looked out into the mango grove. Near one of the narrow doors, Shaibya, richly dressed and heavily veiled exactly as the bride was, slipped into the procession, and Rukmini stepped out to hide herself in a dark corner. Once Shaibya and Rudracharya had turned the corner of the *marg*, she

threw off the floral veil and followed Shvetaketu as he slipped out of the narrow door.

The circumambulation of the goddess being over, other ceremonies started, the veiled bride kneeling before the goddess seemingly in mute devotion.

Shvetaketu, followed by Rukmini, ran into the mango grove. Uddhava and Satyaki stepped out from behind two trees and noiselessly began to lead the way to the confluence of the rivers where the boat was waiting for them.

'Uddhava, stop,' said Rukmini in a voice of command, halting on the way. 'I do not want to go with you. Vaasudeva's wife must follow her lord. Acharya, please lead me to the funeral pyre,' she peremptorily asked Shvetaketu.

'But, but, Princess.....,' began Uddhava.

'Don't speak,' Rukmini, with flashing eyes, told Uddhava. 'There is only one way; that is for me to join my lord. You are his younger brother. Your duty is to light my funeral pyre and make my way to him easy.'

Imperiously she waved Uddhava aside and followed Shvetaketu, who led them towards the cremation ground which was near at hand. They were afraid of interruption, lest the substitution of Shaibya might be discovered before Rukmini entered the fire.

On seeing them coming, Aplava and Jahnu lighted the funeral pyre and poured ghee into it, and the flames leapt high.

Rukmini, near the pyre, with hands folded, worshipped the sun, praying to her lord to receive her in the Land of the Manes.

Suddenly they heard the clattering of hoofs across the river. Rukmini, not to be arrested on her chosen way, lifted her foot to climb the pyre.

Uddhava and Shvetaketu turned lest at the last minute their plan might be frustrated, and looked across the river to see whose the chariot was which was coming so suddenly.

Their hearts jumped for joy. On the chariot stood

Krishna, the reins in his hand, lashing at the horses furiously.

Shvetaketu pulled Rukmini back. She turned. On the chariot, clattering over the stone bed of the ford, stood her Govinda, coming to take her away.

Her mind was in a mad whirl. She forgot everything and ran towards the chariot.

The chariot crossed the ford. The horses were reined in abruptly. Krishna jumped down from the chariot, lifted Rukmini in his arms and seated her on the chariot.

The others, bursting with joy, ran back to the mango grove to cross the river in the boat.

Krishna took the reins from the hands of Bahuka, his charioteer, and by a swift movement turned back the horses and crossed the ford.

The chariot flew across the ford. After passing over the river, he halted the horses, lifted the *Panchajanya* conch hanging at his waist and blew the blast of triumph.

The blast rang out, announcing to friends and foes alike that its master was still alive and as triumphant as ever.

EPILOGUE

I

Rukmini stood gazing at the sea, as picture after picture rose before her, for, in the last two months, she had passed through hectic experiences and lived a hundred lives.

Krishna lifted her into the chariot, and whipped the horses. It clattered across the stony ford of the Purna, sometimes throwing her violently against the sides of the chariot. But Krishna's heartening smile gave her courage. How happy she felt to be with him ! Not for her any longer the nightmare of a *swayamvara* !

Then they met the Yadava contingent headed by Balarama. She had never seen the Big Brother before, this giant of a man and yet so kind and generous. He blessed her in a booming voice and his big eyes showed deep affection for her.

The Yadavas had scarcely proceeded on their journey along the north bank of the river Tapti for more than a day, when Rukmi, her brother, with the Bhoja cadets, came upon them. A violent skirmish followed.

She managed to look at the clashing warriors though oppressed with fear. Her brother, driving his chariot furiously, rushed at Krishna's. Shuddering, she closed her eyes.

Then opening them, she looked at her lord, afraid lest he should be wounded by Rukmi and she trembled from head to foot. He was an unfamiliar Krishna, as he stood in the chariot-driver's seat, the reins of the horses in his left hand, his face un-smiling, his eyes flashing power.

She saw Rukmi's arrow being aimed at Krishna. She closed her eyes again and shuddered. When she opened

them, she found that Krishna had eluded the speeding arrow by stepping aside.

Then she saw a strange gesture; Krishna preparing to take the discus, *Sudarshana chakra,* which hung by a strap on his back. She had heard of the invincible *chakra* so often. It was terrible and never missed its mark. 'Oh, God of all gods! Am I to be the murderer of my own brother?' she thought. Instinctively she crawled up to where her Govinda was standing, and touched his feet. He looked down. 'Lord, lord, don't kill my brother,' she cried piteously, tears flowing from her eyes.

Krishna looked down at her; there was a smile of reassurance on his lips; he withdrew his hand from the *chakra.* Immediately he handed the reins to Bahuka, the charioteer, took his bow *Sharnga* in his hand, and fixed an arrow to its string.

She again closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she saw the arrow speeding towards Rukmi. 'Will it kill Rukmi? Oh, God of all gods! Please let Rukmi live.'

A loud outcry followed. The horses neighed; some of them reared. The Yadavas shouted, 'Victory to Vaasudeva.' They had won.

The chariots halted. The horses became quiet. On the ground lay her brother, not dead, but wounded by Krishna's arrow. Uddhava was bending over him, stanching the flow of his blood. She offered thanks to the God of all gods, and vowed to have *maharudra* worship performed. Her brother had just opened his eyes!

Krishna climbed down from his chariot. Rukmi, in spite of his wounds, sat up — he was a tough warrior — snarling and cursing Krishna. The Big Brother laughed uproariously at these impotent curses.

Her Govinda then bent down and, with the help of Uddhava and Satyaki, lifted Rukmi from the ground and brought him to the chariot and placed him by her side.

Rukmi's wounds, in spite of being bandaged, were still

bleeding. He looked at her in wrath and tried to spit at her.

'Rukmi,' Krishna said, lapsing into his own sweet manner, 'forget everything and forgive your sister. She has saved your life. But for her, you would have been dead.'

Rukmi hissed the words: 'Wretched cowherd!' It was wicked of Rukmi to do so, for her Govinda had saved him because of her.

'Control your anger, Rukmi. I am just sending you back to Kundinapura to King Bhishmaka,' said Krishna, laughing.

Suddenly Rukmi summoned up all his strength to shout at Krishna. 'No, no, I have sworn not to return to Kundinapura unless I bring back your severed head in my hand. I will not go there.'

'Did you? Was it nice to have taken a vow to make your sister a widow?' Krishna asked him mockingly. 'You could have done many more glorious things than that, Rukmi. Well, if you do not want to go back to Kundinapura, I will take you with me to Dwaraka. You can live among the Yadavas as an honoured brother of my bride.'

At that moment, Big Brother came up and asked what the matter was. He had always a big heart and looked sympathetically at Rukmi. Then in his loud, kindly voice, he said: 'Krishna, anyone in Rukmi's place would have tried to vindicate the family honour by fighting you, as you had carried away his sister. He has not done anything wrong, though it was very foolish of him to have disapproved of you as Rukmi's bridegroom. He must go back to Kundinapura. If necessary, I will take him there.'

Rukmi opened his eyes and with considerable heat exclaimed: 'I will not go back to Kundinapura. I have sworn not to go back unless I carry Krishna's head with me.'

'Then, there is only one honourable way for you, Rukmi,' Big Brother said. 'At Dwaraka your position as the brother of Krishna's wife, at best, would be humiliat-

ing. You had better settle down where we are now. We will soon depart, and with those of your men who have been left you can establish yourself here.'

II

After a happy journey to Surya Tirtha, they embarked in ships and came to Prabhasa, where they worshipped Somanatha, the God of gods. There followed an exultant welcome by the Yadavas : flowers and flags; white and red powder, the blowing of conchs, ringing of bells, playing of fifes.

Mother Devaki embraced Rukmini again and again, breathing in the scent of her hair, with tears in her eyes. Sister Revati — Big Brother's wife, a giantess — was very kind and affectionate. And dear old Trivakra, the architect of all her good fortune, was there, literally dancing for joy, and at her age too.

Then she respectfully prostrated herself before the Father, King Ugrasena, Uncles Akrura and Devabhaga, and so many other elders that she could hardly remember their names. There were women of all ages, hugging her, praising her beauty, decking her in ornaments and fine clothes, taking her to the sea for a bathe.

Living with Mother Devaki, as a bride-to-be, she had to rest content with merely stealing glances at her Govinda. Speaking to him was now an impossibility, for decorum forbade this in the presence of elders. She only received his messages through Trivakra, and sometimes Uddhava, with the privilege of the husband's younger brother, brought some little present.

The marriage festivities followed. The whole of Dwaraka grew gay. The Yadavas went about in rich robes. Every house was decorated. Children came, dancing for joy and singing songs. The sailors from the ships, led by a very wizened old chief whose name she could never remember, wanted to have a look at the bride of their 'god.'

Then the guests came — Shakradeva of Karavirapura and Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti, and other princes from the surrounding principalities. And with Shakradeva was her saviour, Shaibya who gave her what she prized most — her Govinda.

The old family priest, Gargacharya, was there, of course, with his white beard and mane, before the sacred fire. Hands were joined. She thrilled at the touch of her Govinda's hand firmly clasping hers. They took the seven sacred steps together that made her one with Govinda, and she became his wife before gods and men, never to part from him in this life.

Then followed music and dancing; womenfolk sang songs suited to the occasion; the Yadavas, young and old, embraced each other. Her lord, as handsome as ever, the peacock feather waving on his diadem, dressed in yellow *pitambar* and scarf, went about accosting everyone with a winning smile or a kindly word, often cracking jokes with young women or laughing with the boys, all worshipful eyes turned to him. Oh, it was wonderful to be his wife, she felt.

Then came the night of all nights. The ladies bedecked her. The young women tutored her. Revati talked of things which brought blushes to her cheek. Trivakra led her, trembling as she was out of sheer nervousness, to the nuptial chamber.

When left alone there, she tried to compose her shattered nerves, expecting the footfall for which she had been waiting all her life.

Then Govinda came and smiled, and her confidence was restored. She rose and stood by his side; shy and nervous and anxious to please. Then he put away his diadem, took off his *vaijayanti* and gathered her in his arms. How happy and secure she felt in those beloved, protective arms !

And the whole night was but a single moment of ecstasy.

Then next day, after her Govinda left very early to join the menfolk at their exercises, Rukmini lay in bed, till late in the morning, enjoying half-awake dreams of delight to the rhythm of the waves of the stormy sea as they lashed furiously against the shore near Vasudeva's mansion. Mother Devaki, with her usual understanding, had told her not to join her till the mid-day meal.

She was, therefore, in a very happy mood when Uddhava, with the privilege of a husband's younger brother, came to her. She liked Uddhava immensely though she stood in awe of him. Whenever she met him, she could not help feeling that he was a man come from the other world, helping people and yet standing aloof.

Uddhava came and folded his hands before her. He was nothing if not correct. Though he was older than Rukmini, since the wedding he would not let her forget that she was entitled to due respect as the wife of his elder brother.

'Krishna will not be able to meet you today, Sister. This morning three ships were reported to be sinking in the storm and Krishna has gone with Satyaki and Virata to arrange for the rescue,' said Uddhava. 'He asked me to look after you.'

Rukmini opened her eyes wide with fear. 'How will he be able to arrange for the rescue?' she asked anxiously.

'He has taken Kukkura, the Master of the Ships, with him. They will sail in small boats on the high seas to rescue the survivors if the ships have sunk,' said Uddhava.

'But since last night the sea is very stormy. He may be drowned himself,' Rukmini could not help exclaiming in the sudden onrush of distress.

'Thirty families of the Yadavas were sailing in those ships to Bhrigu Tirtha. Krishna could not let them be drowned,' said Uddhava.

'But didn't he think of us, risking his life in a stormy sea? If something happens to him, oh, God of all gods! what will happen to me?' asked Rukmini piteously, tears in her eyes.

Uddhava's attitude was affectionate and protective. 'Don't worry. Nothing will happen to Krishna. Anyway, who can stop him from doing what he wants to do? The Yadavas could not. Jarasandha could not. Kala Yavana could not. Who are we to stop him?'

'You are cruel, Brother,' Rukmini flared up. 'Don't you see Govinda's life may be in danger?'

'Don't become excited, Rukmini,' Uddhava replied in the indulgent tones of a loving elder brother. 'I also love him, and so do many. But he will share his life not only with you and me, but with all of us who look to him with love, and risk it every time one of us finds himself in danger.' Then he added with a smile: 'That is what Govinda is. We must take him for what he is and surrender ourselves to him.'

Rukmini bit her lips in impatience. 'Yes, every one loves him and he loves every one else. Where do I come in?'

'Bhishmaka's daughter, with him you will always come first. Don't forget that when he was facing death at the hands of Kala Yavana, his last thought was of you.'

Rukmini felt the force of the rebuke so mildly conveyed to her by Uddhava.

'He has given you the privilege of sharing his Dharma with him. You must learn to share it,' Uddhava added.

Reminded of her own insufficiency, Rukmini sobbed with soft, faint gasps. 'I know, Brother, I am never going to share his life. I am unfit to be his *sahadharmacharini*.[1] Oh, God of all gods, why did you not make me fit to share his burden?' She flung herself desperately on the bed.

For some time neither of them spoke. Then she added: 'Did he leave any message for me?'

'Yes, he did,' replied Uddhava. He said: "Uddhava, tell her to be the guardian goddess of the Yadavas; they are part of me. And you, Uddhava, must always be at her service." So he really felt himself in danger, Rukmini! And yet he left you to face the future calmly.'

Then her mind suddenly went back to the day when Shaibya and she were crying in each other's arms over what they thought was the death of Krishna.

'Where is Shaibya? Let me go to her,' Rukmini said suddenly. 'Did he leave any message for Shaibya?' she asked.

'Yes, he did,' replied Uddhava. 'He said: "Uddhava, if I do not return, hand over my *chakra* to her. She will spend her whole life worshipping it."'

Rukmini began to sob as a thought struck her. 'I am a very wicked woman. Yesterday in my happiness I forgot even to go and embrace her. I wish I had done so. Please go and tell her that I want her very badly.'

Uddhava smiled indulgently at this childish impatience. 'My sister, no sooner did she hear at dawn that Krishna had gone to rescue the drowning men than she followed him to Prabhasa in a chariot. She left word with Shakradeva that she proposed to wait on the sea-shore of Prabhasa till Krishna returned safely.'

III

After Uddhava left, Rukmini felt crushed. A pang of jealousy shot through her heart. Shaibya wanted to marry Krishna. Though rejected by him, she had won him by complete surrender. She even went to the length of securing her, Rukmini, for him. Now that his life was in danger, she was the first to run to the sea-shore to await his return indefinitely.

She was a wretch, Rukmini felt. In her overflowing happiness, yesterday, she had not even talked to Shaibya, embraced her or given her a fitting welcome. And today, while she, like a selfish woman, was crying over what would happen to her if Krishna never came back, it was Shaibya who had gone to the sea-shore to wait for him.

For a long time Rukmini lay on her bed, shedding tears. She felt wretched beyond words; she was ungrateful, jealous, selfish. In the choking misery which gripped

her, she would have liked Shaibya to come and sit by her side. At the same time she hated the very idea of that dark beauty having a place in her husband's heart. But could she ever monopolise the heart of her Govinda, she asked herself. Could she ever stop him loving Vasudeva, Mother Devaki, Balarama, Akrura, Uddhava and even Trivakra, in the way he did? He loved the old Yadava women. He was their darling, telling them stories. He never met a young woman, but he bandied words with her and every one of them loved him. Often he would play with little children and they would follow him wherever he went. He loved them all. And who was she to say that she would rob them of the sunshine of their lives?

Then her mood changed to self-condemnation. She was unfit to be his bride. He was a god and he had made her a goddess by his touch, but she had nothing of a goddess in her. She loved him only with the narrow selfish love of an ordinary woman in her heart. She had never thought of what Krishna's attitude towards Shaibya was. She never worried about Shaibya's self-sacrifice or what her dreary life in Karavirapura without Krishna would be. In trying to be a selfish wife, she was only trying to drag him from the high pedestal of a man who loved all and whom everyone loved.

She long pursued this line of thought. She was a woman; it was natural for her to be jealous, being his wife, but his touch had made her superhuman. She had even to outvie Shaibya in surrendering herself to him and help him to his fulfilment in his own way.

Shaibya had a great devotion for him. Had he thought of marrying Shaibya, would he quietly allow Shaibya to wither away lonely in Karavirapura? No, he would not, she felt sure. He knew the value of Shaibya's love for him and hers also. She, Rukmini, was, therefore, to be a goddess to be worshipped by the Yadavas and Shaibya was to worship his *chakra*—the weapon he worshipped himself and which made him invincible.

Then in anguish she cried out : 'Govinda, whomever you love, I shall love also. Shaibya shall not go back to Karavirapura to lead a desolate life. Govinda, please came back to me safely. Forgive the jealous and selfish woman that I am.'

Rukmini rose from the bed, washed her face, put on a new dress and ornaments and joined Mother Devaki at her daily labours. Then, when the meal was finished, she begged her to let her go to Prabhasa and be with Shaibya.

When her chariot took her to the fort in the afternoon, she saw a strange sight : Shaibya was standing on the jetty all alone, gazing steadfastly across the storm-tossed seas at the unseen horizon, regardless of the waves which beat on the shore and sprayed her.

And on her lips was an ineffable smile — a smile which Rukmini had never seen before — as if, by its sweetness, she was luring Krishna back to her.

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. Usually, out of respect, a man of position was addressed by a slight change in his father's name or in the name of his family. Sri Krishna being the son of Vasudeva was called Vaasudeva, which, ultimately, when he was apotheosised, came to be identified with the name of God. To distinguish Sri Krishna from his father, I have used the name Vaasudeva, as it is pronounced. Krishna was also addressed as Yaadava and Maadhava from the names of his forbears.
2. Unit of time, twenty-four minutes long.

Chapter 2

1. In India, from the earliest times, the wife or the betrothed does not address her husband or affianced by name. It is supposed to be a sign of vulgarity. He is addressed as 'the son of so-and-so.' When children are born, the wife addressed, and still addresses, her husband as the 'father of so-and-so'. Only among the lowest of low classes does the wife address her husband by his short name and as 'thou'; one of the surest signs of a rise from the status of a low caste in the hierarchy of culture is that the wife begins to address the husband in the plural and never by his name. In modern times, however, the Westernised wife, in circles which have little regard for Indian manners, calls her husband by his name often shortened, and 'thous' him — to the sorrow of all those who have not forsaken the old cultural traditions.

Chapter 6

1. Ritual to be performed thrice a day, in which the

principal act is the repitition of the famous *Gayatri mantra.*

Chapter 7

1. The guess that I had made years ago that there might have been settlements of Harappan culture near the seacoasts of Saurashtra and Gujarat has been borne out by the discovery of the remains of a Harappan town at Lothal in Gujarat.
2. The original Saurashtra Prakrit, a variety of the Vedic Sanskrit.
3. The region round Hyderabad (Sind).
4. Education in ancient India being free, the pupil, on completing his education and whenever able, used to make a suitable present to the teacher, which was called *gurudakshina,* teacher's fee.

Chapter 12

1. This pedigree is taken from Vikadru's speech as given in *Harivamsa.* But Vikadru, though he said that Veda Vyasa had taught him this genealogy, evidently became confused about it. Anyway, it throws light on the wide area over which the Yadavas had spread.
2. Modern Sopara, near Bombay, which was an international port in pre-historic times.

Chapter 13

1. Women's section of a palace.

Chapter 15

1. Crown Prince.

Chapter 19

1. Vasudeva's son is called Vaasudeva. God was also referred to as Vaasudeva in some of the Aryan cults,

particularly in the cult from which Pancharatra Sampradaya sprang.

2. The ritual of waving lights before a deity or a very highly venerable person.

Chapter 20

1. Musicians of the gods.
2. Dancing girls of the gods.

Chapter 30

1. That is, Baby-Krishna. The names Gopala and Govinda, both meaning cowherd or lord of cows, stuck to Krishna throughout his life in spite of his later achievements and he has been worshipped even under the names of Bala-Krishna, Bala-Gopala and Bala-Govinda.

Chapter 42

1. A respectful term applied to a husband; in this case Damaghosha.

EPILOGUE

1. Sharer in the fulfilment of Dharma.

APPENDICES

I. PANCHAJANA and PUNYAJANA RAKSHASAS

The first outstanding exploit of Sri Krishna, after he killed Kamsa, was bringing back the son of his Guru Sandipani from Vaivasvatapuri. This appears to be based on an authentic tradition. Sandipani's son was taken away from somewhere near Prabhasa and carried to Vaivasvatapuri across the sea. Going in search of the boy, Sri Krishna vanquished Panchajana, a sea-going *rakshasa* (*rakshasa* being a term applied to uncouth aliens speaking a foreign language). Another tradition has it that Punyajana *rakshasas* had established a settlement at Kushasthali on the sea-coast of Saurashtra.

The Panis in the *Rigveda* were a people who did not give offerings to the Aryan gods and are spoken of as 'wolves' or 'demons' and usurers. They were also called the Dasyus and of hostile speech. Some scholars consider them to be aboriginal traders who went in caravans (even to Arabia), prepared to fight, if need be, to protect their goods against attacks (Macdonnel & Keith, *Vedic Index*, Vol. I, page 471 and 472).

I am inclined, therefore, to speculate that Punyajana, Panchajanas, and Panis were different names for the same class of aliens who can be identified with the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians were a sea-going people, known to the ancients of Europe for their adventurous spirit and dishonest ways. Before they settled in Phoenicia between 1,600 and 1,350 B. C. (Rawlinson's *History of Phoenicia*, p. 406), they lived in settlements on the shores of the Eurythrean Sea to the south of Phoenicia. That points to the Arabian Sea being the sphere of the Phoenicians' activities.

II. YAMA, KING OF VAIVASVATAPURI

Sandipani's son was brought back from Vaivasvatapuri, the City of Yama, from across the sea, after vanquishing Yama, the God of Death, who is the son of Vivasvan, the Sun God. The name may mean also the City of Sun or Light. One of the ancient sites on the Arabian sea is said to bear the name of 'the City of Light'. There was also a city near Babylon called Larsa, which is translated as 'the City of the Sun'.

If the episode in *Harivamsa* is closely scrutinised, it appears that Yama, the king of Vaivasvatapuri, was not the God of Death, Yama, but a living person. This Yama, according to *Harivamsa,* first worshipped Krishna as Vishnu and then chose to fight him rather than part with Sandipani's son. It is inconceivable that Yama, a subordinate god, would fight Vishnu himself. This would show that Krishna defeated some king whom tradition later transformed into Yama, the God of Death. And if it was a king, there must have been some valid reason why he would not part with the boy, who must have been in some way indispensable.

If my surmise is correct, then Vaivasvatapuri was situated somewhere across the seas from Saurashtra. In this connection, it may be noted that the region of Hyderabad in Sind was called Patala, right up to the advent of Alexander. Some island in the Arabian Sea or a port on its shore was also ruled by the Naga King, Dhumravarma, who gave his daughters in marriage to one of the ancestors of Sri Krishna; for the son of one of these daughters inherited Dhumravarma's island, where the people specialised in fishing out jewels (pearls) from the sea (*Harivamsa. Vishnuparva,* 38. 29-34). This would indicate that there were Naga settlements in the Arabian Sea. All authorities agree that one of the ancestors of Sri Krishna and the

Pandavas was a Naga princess. Shoora, the Yadava chief, who founded the Shoora clan, was married to the daughter of the Naga king Aryaka, variously named Bhoja, Bhashi or Marisha. By her Shoora had ten sons of whom Vasudeva, the father of Sri Krishna, was the eldest, and Devabhaga, father of Uddhava, the next, and five daughters, of whom Pritha or Kunti, mother of the Pandavas, was the eldest, and Shrutashrava, the Queen of Chedi and mother of Shishupala, the fourth. (*Mahabharata, Adi Parva,* Chapter 128, Verse 64; *Bhagavata,* IX. 24, *Harivamsa,* I. 134).

In the early stages of society, before the Aryans came to India, the people of the chalcolithic culture, which had spread from Asia Minor to Japan from about 4,000 B.C., worshipped the Mother Goddess. She was also popular with the people of Harappan culture, and some scholars believe that the original name of the Mother Goddess was Ma, from which our words Uma and Amba are possibly derived.

III. The Gomantaka Episode

The episode of Krishna and Balarama's finding their first asylum in Gomantaka has a place in the *Harivamsa,* but not in the *Vishnu Purana* or the *Bhagavata.* If the *Harivamsa* tradition is correct, Gomantaka may be modern Goa or possibly some other place on the western seacoast near the Mahendra Mountains — a peak of the Sahya Mountains.

This episode is important for several reasons. It is during his stay at Gomantaka that Sri Krishna came in contact with Garuda. In some passages of the *Puranas,* Garuda is a divine bird and in others a human being who is like an eagle (*Harivamsa* II, Adhya. 40, 41). It is also in Gomantaka that Sri Krishna and Balarama receive the weapons associated with them, each one of which is traditionally known by a specific name (*Harivamsa* II, Adhya. 43-9 & 10).

In the Gomantaka episode Balarama for the first time develops some habits which in the *Puranas* he is attributed with. Every *Purana* attributes to him fondness for liquor but the *Harivamsa* describes how in Gomantaka he was drawn to a sweet-smelling Kadamba tree and first drank the nectar flowing from it. That is why wine is called 'Kadambari' (*Harivamsa* II, Adhya. 41-43). I am not quite sure whether at any period of time with which we associate Sri Krishna and Balarama the Kadamba tree grew on the western seacoast.

It is also during his stay in Gomantaka that Balarama enjoyed the company of three celestial nymphs with the names which in my narrative I have given to three girls of the Garuda clan (*Harivamsa* II, Adhya. 41-35).

The Gomantaka episode is important, for it narrates how the brothers inflicted the disastrous defeat on Jarasandha and his friends, which earned for them the aura of invincibility with which they are found invested in the later episodes.

GLOSSARY

Abhishek — One of the rituals at a Coronation.

Acharya — Preceptor ; religious head.

Adharma — Action contrary to Dharma.

Aindra Abhishek — Abhishek as done for Indra by the gods ; hence applied to coronation of kings.

Akshaya tritiya — The third day of the bright half of the month of *Vaishakh* (April/May), considered a very auspicious day.

Apsaras — A kind of celestial beings of the fair sex noted for their charm.

Arghya — An offering of water with cupped hands to the accompaniment of mantra, as a token of worship.

Arya Dharma — Dharma governing Arya behaviour ; ancient law and religion of the Arya.

Ashram — Hermitage of a Rishi ; a sylvan school for imparting learning in scriptures, sacrificial lore and martial sciences.

Ashwamedha — Horse Sacrifice performed by a king when he attains imperial status.

Asura — Demon.

Asuric — Demoniac.

Atirathi — Chariot warrior of the highest rank.

Bahu-yuddha — Fight with bare hands ; wrestling.

Brahmachari — A celibate student, who spends years with his teacher to acquire learning.

Brahmacharya — The status of a celibate studentship ; absolute control of sex-energy.

Brahman — Supreme Spirit.

Brahma tej — Spiritual strength.

Chaitra — A Hindu calendar month which falls in March/April.

Chakra — Wheel ; discus.

Chakravarti — An emperor who commands the allegiance of vassal kings.

Champak — A flower of sweet fragrance.

Chandika — Manifestation of the powers of the Trinity, the Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, in the form of a goddess of awesome beauty and powers.

Dakshinayan — Period dedicated to the *Pitrus* or Manes, during which nothing auspicious could be done.

Darshan — Sight of divine or highly respected persons, which uplifts the soul.

Dhoti — Loose garment tied round the waist and covering the lower half of the body, with or without folds.

Gandharva — (noun) A celestial being noted for music ; (adjective) applied to a marriage by a man and woman in love, without witnesses.

Garudas — A class of beings supposed to be eagles descended from Suparna.

Gopala — Cow-herd.

Goshala — Cow-pen.

Govinda — Lord of cows ; as applied to Krishna, Lord of devotees.

Hari — The Original One ; Destroyer of sin ; applied to Krishna.

Homa — Rituals in which offerings are made to the sacred fire, generally of ghee.

Kamadeva — God of love, Cupid.

Kamandalu — Bowl hewn from wood, used by ascetics for carrying water.

Karttik — A Hindu calendar month (October/November).

Kshatra tej — The lustre of heroism.

Kumkum — Red turmeric powder applied to the forehead on auspicious occasions. Women whose husbands are alive are under a religious duty to apply it on their forehead.

Linga — Uncarved stone duly installed and worshipped as the image of Shiva, or Maheswara, God of all gods.

Magha — A Hindu calendar month (January/February).

Maharathi — A chariot-warrior of the rank subordinate to an *Atirathi*, often used as a synonym.

Maharudra — An elaborate ceremony in which ritualistic worship is offered to Lord Shiva, God of all gods.

Mandapa — A large area roofed by cloth or dry leaves of the palm tree, in which holy rites, ceremonies or other celebrations are held.

Manes, Land of the — A heavenly region in which the deceased ancestors of the family (*Pitrus*) live as spirits to guide their children on earth.

Mantra — Sacred chants having the power to secure the blessings of God.

Margashirsha — A Hindu calendar month (November/December).

Muni — An ascetic of the highest order.

Murari — Destroyer of the demon called Mura, Krishna.

Nagas — A widespread ethnic group which in the days of Krishna occupied large tracts of land and who were ultimately fused with the Aryas.

Natha — Lord; husband; protector; master.

Nishadas — Forest-dwelling nomadic tribes.

Niyoga — A practice sanctioned by the Hindu *Shastras* under which a childless widow can beget issues by her deceased husband's brother.

Parashu — Axe; hence Parashurama, the master of the martial art, considered the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

Parikrama marg — A circumambulatory path, generally a paved path around the sanctum sanctorum of a temple, on which devotees walk in a clock-wise direction as part of their worship.

Phalgun — A Hindu calendar month (March/April).

Pitambar — Cloth, light yellow in colour, used as dhoti, generally made of silk.

Prajapati — Brahma, the Creator.

Prasad — Fruits, flowers or other edible articles consecrated by offering to Gods.

Purusha — God; the male principle in creation with its female counterpart *Prakriti.*

Rajadharma — Code of kingly conduct.

Rajasuya — An elaborate ritual accompanied by sacrificial session, performed to indicate the emperorship of a king.

Rakshasas — Demons; cannibals living beyond the pale of Aryan civilization.

Rasa — A special kind of dance developed by the cowherds and cowherdesses, associated with Krishna when he was in Vrindavan.

Richas — Mantras in the *Rig Veda.*

Rishi — Man of learning and piety, who imparts the study and teaching of the *Vedas.*

Rita — The Cosmic Order.

Rudra — Lord Shiva in His terrific aspect.

Rudraksha — A dried fruit used as a bead on a rosary used by devotees to please Lord Shiva.

Sadhu — A holy man.

Satya — Truth; Eternal Verities.

Satya Yuga — The first of the four great Ages according to Hindu measurement of Time, also called Krita Yuga. The other Yugas are Treta, Dwapara and Kali.

Shastras — Scientific, legalistic or canonical treatises.

Shraddha — Faith.

Sura — Wine; liquor.

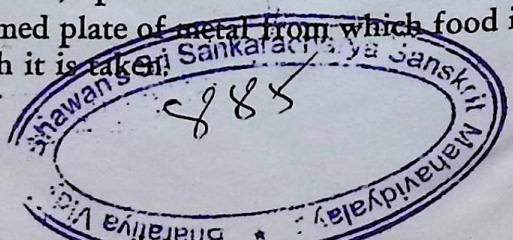
Swayamvara — The ceremony of self-choosing; a gathering of princes in which a princess selects her husband.

Tapas — Self-discipline imposed by controlling the senses, pursued by the munis.

Tapasvi — Man engaged in Tapas.

Tej — Power; halo; splendour.

Thali — A rimmed plate of metal from which food is served or in which it is taken.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Vaijayanti — A garland worn as a sign of victory.

Vaishakh — A Hindu calendar month (April/May).

Vaishwadeva — A ritual in which offering is made to the God of fire.

Vedas — Scriptures of the Hindus, the oldest literary compositions that have come down in Sanskrit. They were believed to be given by Gods to the rishis, and their injunctions are considered inviolable.

Vedashala — Room set apart for teaching and reciting the *Vedas*.

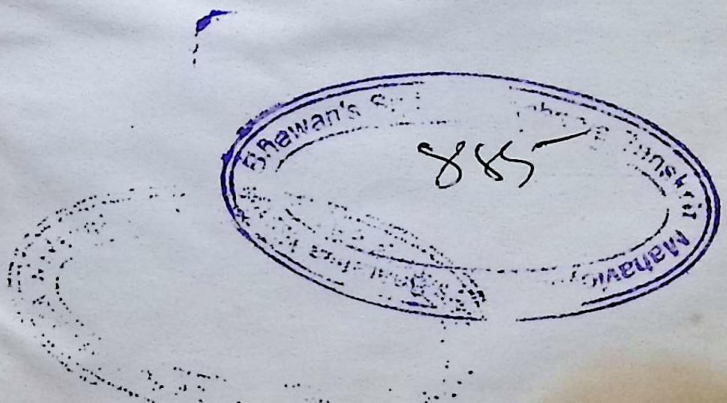
Vedi — A platform or a pit in which sacrifice is performed.

Vidhi — Lord Brahma, the Creator.

Vrata — Observance of holy vow; sacred discipline.

Yajna — A sacrificial ritual.

Yajnopavita samskara — An investiture ceremony in which the sacred thread is given to a boy, which gives him the privilege of studying the *Vedas* and performing sacrifices. According to Hindu Shastris, the investiture is necessary before entering the stage of a celibate studenthood or of a married man.

Yavanas — Mlechchas; barbarous people living beyond the Sindhu.

Yojana — Four miles.